Esquire

WHY MEN LIE TO THEMSELVES

BY JOSHUA FERRIS

THE RAW TRUTH ABOUT THE FOREVER WAR

FROM A GENERAL, A SNIPER, AN AFGHAN, AN ALLY

THERE'S A SPERM SHORTAGE IN AMERICA. ONE GUY IS REAPING ALL THE BENEFITS.

BUY THIS SHIRT, WEAR IT FOREVER

PAGE 31

IDRIS ELBA

The World's Coolest Man

Publicis EtNous

HERMÈS
PARIS
Objects connect.

FEELS LIK

KE PRADA

#FEELSLIKEPRADA

PRADA.COM

CANALI
FEEL THE GRACE
OF NATURE
CANALI.COM

CANALI
FEEL THE GRACE
OF NATURE
#GENTLEGESTURES

4
B549 WUU

omegawatches.com

NO TIME TO DIE 007

ONLY IN THEATERS

JAMES BOND'S CHOICE

On the trail of a mysterious villain, James Bond faces his latest mission in *No Time To Die* wearing the OMEGA Seamaster Diver 300M. This 007 timepiece comes ready for action with a lightweight titanium design and a high standard of Master Chronometer precision and anti-magnetism that can always be trusted.

OMEGA

loropiana.com

Loro Piana

Dom Pérignon
x
LADY GAGA

Champagne, © 2021 Imported by Moët Hennessy USA, Inc.,
New York, NY. Please drink responsibly.

JAEGER-LECOULTRE

Jaeger-LeCoultre Boutiques
New York – The Forum Shops – South Coast Plaza – Beverly Hills – Yorkdale Shopping Centre

REVERSO
TRIBUTE

GIORGIO ARMANI

TABLE OF CONTENTS
OCTOBER/NOVEMBER 2021

Welcome to Esquire.

Idris Elba discusses overcoming a hellish year, starring in a western, and, yes, the Bond rumor, starting on page 72.

18 EDITOR'S LETTER

BLUEPRINT

21 Our country, the aging child actor; the ultimate midlife-crisis car (it's not what you're expecting); what James Bond *really* drank; the email newsletters worth your scroll time; the essential plain white oxford; Loro Piana's new collab; and are you man enough to carry a bag? Plus, the 2021 Esquire Grooming Awards: Of all the products out there, these are the ones that will make you look–and feel–your best.

COLUMNS

54 THE BEAUTY IN LYING TO YOURSELF
by Joshua Ferris
It's like the world has been rubbing our noses in it. Police brutality. A global pandemic. Climate change. The author, a novelist, discovers the power of everyday fictions.

58 POWER IS ON THE DOCKET
by Charles P. Pierce
The Supreme Court's upcoming term could render a final verdict on the conservative movement.

61 WE THINK . . . IT'S TIME . . . TO PARTY
Have friends over? It's been a while, but let's do it. Here, eight can't-miss pieces of hosting wisdom that'll help you ease into festivities again.

FEATURES

70 WHAT I'VE LEARNED: PADMA LAKSHMI
Interview by Madison Vain
"A great dinner party doesn't have anything to do with well-appointed linens or shiny silver platters. It starts with a good guest list."

72 COVER: THE IDRIS ELBA EFFECT
by Tim Lewis
Last year should have been one of the most difficult of his life–after all, he sincerely thought he might die–yet the multitalented Englishman emerged from it as untouchable as ever.

82 WHICH WATCH NOW
by Nick Sullivan
The Esquire guide to owning and collecting (and enjoying!) timepieces, including ten of the best new watches of the year.

88 HAVE SPERM, WILL TRAVEL
by Rachel Monroe
Amid a historic shortage at sperm banks nationwide, a new means of donation is on the rise: Facebook groups. That's how Elaine Byrd met Ari Nagel, a superdonor with nearly a hundred biological children and counting. But could he possibly live up to his own hype?

96 MAN OF LETTERS AND WARM COATS
by Matt Miller
Lee Pace is a star of the show *Foundation* and an all-around good guy. He also looks great in this season's most stylish outerwear.

106 LEAVING AFGHANISTAN BEHIND
by Matt Gallagher
The longest war in our nation's history is over. As these eyewitnesses attest–a commanding general, a sniper, an interpreter, and others–the battle over its memory is just beginning.

118 ESQUIRE ENDORSES . . .
The wearing of other people's clothes.

JACKET, SWEATER, AND TROUSERS BY **DOLCE & GABBANA;** BOOTS BY **GRENSON.**

ON THE COVER
IDRIS ELBA PHOTOGRAPHED FOR ESQUIRE BY ADAMA **JALLOH.** CASTING BY RANDI PECK. CREATIVE DIRECTION BY NICK SULLIVAN. STYLING BY CHERYL KONTEH. PRODUCTION BY LUCY WATSON. SET DESIGN BY GILLIAN O'BRIEN. HAIR BY RIAZE FOSTER. GROOMING BY JESSICA DEBRUYNE. JACKET BY **BERLUTI.**

ADAMA JALLOH

MICHAEL SEBASTIAN
EDITOR IN CHIEF

NICK SULLIVAN_Creative Director
BEN BOSKOVICH_Deputy Editor
ABIGAIL GREENE_Executive Managing Editor
ROCKWELL HARWOOD_Design Director
JOHN KENNEY_Managing Editor
KELLY STOUT_Articles Director
KEVIN SINTUMUANG_Culture and Lifestyle Director
JONATHAN EVANS_Style Director
RANDI PECK_Executive Director of Talent
ERIC SULLIVAN_Senior Editor
MADISON VAIN_Content Strategy Editor
JACK HOLMES_Politics Editor
ADRIENNE WESTENFELD, BRADY LANGMANN_Assistant Editors
SARAH RENSE_Lifestyle Editor
JUSTIN KIRKLAND_Staff Writer
GARRETT MUNCE_Grooming Editor
LAUREN KRANC_Assistant Editor

ART
DRAGOS LEMNEI_Deputy Design Director
MIKE KIM_Digital Design Director
ELAINE CHUNG_Digital Designer
CAMERON SHERRILL_Lead Motion Designer
REBECCA IOVAN_Digital Imaging Specialist

FASHION
TED STAFFORD_Market Director
ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS_Market Editor
RASHAD MINNICK_Fashion Associate

HEARST VISUAL GROUP
ALIX CAMPBELL_Chief Visual Content Director, Hearst Magazines
JUSTIN O'NEILL_Visual Director
SALLY BERMAN, JAMES MORRIS_Contributing Visual Directors
KELLY SHERIN_Visual Editor
SAMEET SHARMA_Associate Visual Producer
GIANCARLOS KUNHARDT_Visual Assistant

HEARST VIDEO GROUP
DORENNA NEWTON_Executive Video Producer
ELYSSA AQUINO_Video Producer
DOMINICK NERO_Video Editor

COPY
ALISA COHEN BARNEY_Senior Copy Editor
CONNOR SEARS, DAVID FAIRHURST_Assistant Copy Editors

RESEARCH
ROBERT SCHEFFLER_Research Chief
KEVIN McDONNELL_Senior Research Editor
NICK PACHELLI_Assistant Research Editor

EDITORS AT LARGE
DAVE HOLMES, DANIEL DUMAS

WRITERS AT LARGE
CHARLES P. PIERCE, KATE STOREY, GABRIELLE BRUNEY

CONTRIBUTING WRITER
MITCHELL S. JACKSON

CONTRIBUTING EDITORS
ALEX BELTH, LUKE DITTRICH, JEFF GORDINIER, ADAM GRANT, A. J. JACOBS, JOHN J. LENNON, BENJAMIN PERCY, MIKE SAGER

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS
HITOMI SATO_Contributing Art Director
ABIGAIL COVINGTON_Contributing Weekend Editor

ESQUIRE INTERNATIONAL EDITIONS
China, Czech Republic, Germany, Greece, Hong Kong, Italy, Japan, Kazakhstan, Korea, Latin America, Middle East, Netherlands, Russia, Serbia, Singapore, Spain, Taiwan, Thailand, Turkey, United Kingdom
KIM ST. CLAIR BODDEN_SVP/International Editorial Director
CHLOE O'BRIEN_Deputy Brands Director

CAROL A. SMITH
SENIOR VICE PRESIDENT, GROUP PUBLISHING DIRECTOR

JACK ESSIG_Senior Vice President, Publishing Director
ANNE WELCH_Vice President, General Manager
BRENT WILLIAMS ALLEN_Vice President, Marketing
JEANINE TRIOLO_Executive Director, Advertising Business Operations
LISA PIANA_Group Executive Marketing Director & Sales Strategy
CHRIS PEEL_Vice President, Sales
RON SABATINI_Group Finance Manager
DANA WENTZEL_Executive Assistant/Business Associate

INTEGRATED ADVERTISING SALES
JOANNA NOWACK MELISSAKIS_Group Executive Director, Beauty & Lifestyle
AARON KRANSDORF_Group Executive Director, Fashion & Luxury
KATE SLAVIN_Senior Executive Sales Director, Luxury
PAULA FORTGANG, JOHN WATTIKER_Executive Sales Directors, Fashion
CARYN KESLER_Executive Sales Director, Luxury
ANGELA PARAUDA, JILL SCHLANGER-SLIVKA_Executive Sales Directors, Beauty
TAMMY COHEN_Executive Sales Director, Lifestyle
JOHN CIPOLLA_Senior Sales Director, Lifestyle
LAUREN DEL VALLE_Senior Sales Director, Beauty
MICHAEL RIGGIO_Senior Sales Director, Fashion
RACHEL MOTOLA_Sales Coordinator
OLIVIA BENSON, AALIA MEHRA, AMANDA SHEERIN_Sales Assistants

INTEGRATED MARKETING
SARAH CLAUSEN, ALEXANDRA KEKALOS, DANA MENDELOWITZ, LINDSAY SABLE_Executive Marketing Directors
AMANDA GILLENTINE_Executive Director, Special Projects
AIMEE COUTURE_Senior Marketing Director
SARA OLDMIXON_Marketing Director
BRIANA ROTELLO_Senior Marketing Manager
EMILY LYNCH_Marketing Manager
GEORGIA KARACOSTAS_Associate Marketing Manager

BRAND DEVELOPMENT
NICOLE SPICEHANDLER_Executive Marketing Director, Research & Brand Development
ALEXANDRA STETZER_Senior Marketing Director, Research & Brand Development
MELANIE SINGER_Associate Marketing Director, Research & Brand Development

CREATIVE SERVICES
THEA KARAS_Executive Creative Director
JESSICA TSOUPLAKIS_Senior Art Director
FRAUKE EBINGER_Creative Director
ALICE STEVENS_Art Director

EVENTS & PROMOTIONS
KAREN MENDOLIA_Executive Marketing Director, Events and Promotions
JESSICA HEINMILLER_Associate Marketing Director, Events and Promotions

ADVERTISING OPERATIONS
MICHAEL NIES_Advertising Services Director
MICHELLE LUIS_Advertising Services and Operations Manager
CHRIS HERTWIG_Production Manager
TREVOR CZAK_Business Assistant

BRANCH OFFICES
MARJAN DiPIAZZA_Executive Sales Director, West Coast
AUTUMN JENKS_Executive Sales Director, Midwest
JASON YASMENT_Sales Director, West Coast
RITA WALKER_Southeast Director (Rita@mandelmediagroup.com)
LUCINDA WEIKEL_Southwest Manager (Lucinda@wnpmedia.com)

CIRCULATION
RICK DAY_VP, Strategy and Business Management
WILLIAM CARTER_Executive Director, Consumer Marketing

PUBLISHED BY HEARST
STEVEN R. SWARTZ_President & Chief Executive Officer
WILLIAM R. HEARST III_Chairman
FRANK A. BENNACK, JR._Executive Vice Chairman
MARK E. ALDAM_Chief Operating Officer

HEARST MAGAZINE MEDIA, INC.
DEBI CHIRICHELLA_President, Hearst Magazines Group, and Treasurer
KATE LEWIS_Chief Content Officer
KRISTEN M. O'HARA_Chief Business Officer
CATHERINE A. BOSTRON_Secretary
GILBERT C. MAURER, MARK F. MILLER_Publishing Consultants

FOR CUSTOMER SERVICE, CALL: 800-888-5400 EMAIL: EsqCustServ@CDSFulfillment.com VISIT: Service.esquire.com WRITE: Customer Service Department, Esquire, P.O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593
Published at 300 West Fifty-seventh Street, New York, NY 10019-3797. Editorial offices: 212-649-4020. Advertising offices: 212-649-4050 ® www.esquire.com. Printed in the U. S. A.

BRUNELLO CUCINELLI

Nature is a gentle, prudent and just guide

MONTAIGNE

www.brunellocucinelli.com

OKAY, SO WE MADE A FEW CHANGES . . .

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO, I GRADUATED with a degree in history from the University of Illinois. I had vague notions of becoming a college professor, maybe a writer. The joke among history majors was that you became a teacher or unemployed. I fell into the latter category. Because I wanted to move out of my parents' house, I compiled my clippings from the college newspaper and got a job at a local paper in the Chicago suburbs, the *Journal & Topics*. I would be a cub reporter.

The editor was and remains a guy named Todd Wessell, one of the unsung heroes of local journalism. Todd taught me how to be a reporter—importantly, a *reporter*, a title he preferred to *journalist*. He also worked my ass off. No job was too small. Once, due to a driver snafu, he asked the reporters to deliver that day's papers. I was tasked with filling the newspaper boxes.

I covered ribbon cuttings, 100th birthdays, and police blotters. I spent a day tailing a car that supposedly had the next leader of the local Catholic archdiocese in it (it did) and a night staking out a public-works building where city employees were allegedly hosting an illegal card game (they weren't). That was the exciting stuff. Most of my time was spent attending meetings of city councils, school boards, and park districts, then writing stories about property-tax increases, zoning laws, curricula, you name it. This was where the sausage of democracy was churned out.

Everyone who aspires to work in media should, I believe, do a tour on a local beat, because you can't hide from the people you write about. Wrote a story about a guy getting a DUI? You might see him at the ribbon cutting. It underscores the importance of getting your facts right, as well as the need to be fearless. A local official gave me a tip about a real estate developer that became a story. The information was wrong, and we issued a correction. The following week, outside a city-council meeting, the developer scolded me in front of my peers. I so badly wanted to be righteous. But I had fucked up. All I could do was eat crow.

I still eat crow from time to time. Not because we get facts wrong—Esquire has some of the best fact-checkers in the business, led by our longtime research chief, Robert Scheffler—but on account of our opinion writing and, occasionally, our choices. One time, a family member questioned why we asked Tom Holland about his politics. My answer: because everything is politics these days.

Before you dig into this issue, I want to explain some of our own sausage making. I've been in this job a little more than two years, and during that time we've experimented with what a magazine should be—specifically in what we call the front of the book, the shorter articles that come before the feature-length stories. In March 2020, we redesigned the front of the book and gave it a new name: The Short Stories. The idea was to mimic the experience of scrolling through a social-media feed on your phone, with a diverse collection of stories about entertainment, style, and drinking. (In March 2021, we broke out the style pages into a new section, The Method.) I was misguided in this approach. A print magazine should not mimic digital; it should be its own bespoke experience. That's why we've renamed and, under the guidance of design director Rockwell Harwood, redesigned that section. It is now called Blueprint, so named because Esquire strives to offer a blueprint for its readers' lives. You will find stories about drinking, eating, cars, design, pop culture, music, books, style, and so much more. We're also introducing a new column from Esquire editor at large Dave Holmes, one of the funniest and most astute writers working today, whose mandate is to write about the unfolding absurdities of life in twenty-first-century America. In his inaugural column, on page 21, Dave compares the U.S. to a child star in middle age. Let me know what you think. I want to hear from all of you—family and otherwise, good and bad.

In the meantime, for the love of democracy, *please* subscribe to your local paper. **—Michael Sebastian**

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALLIE HOLLOWAY

''THERE IS A BEAUTY THAT REMAINS WITH US AFTER WE'VE STOPPED LOOKING.''

CORY RICHARDS,
PHOTOGRAPHER AND EXPLORER, WEARS THE VACHERON CONSTANTIN OVERSEAS.

VACHERON CONSTANTIN
GENÈVE

ONE OF
NOT MANY.

CONTACT US: +1 (877) 701 1755

HERNO US . PHONE +1.516.7433230 . WWW.HERNO.COM
© Cantiere Maggiore
Laminar
HERNO SARTORIAL ENGINEERING
GORE-TEX

blueprint

SIMON CARTER/GETTY IMAGES (FLAG). ANTON STARIKOV/SHUTTERSTOCK (PACIFIER).

Time to Grow Up

The U.S.A. is acting less like a mature superpower and more like a child star in middle age. There is a way out of this mess—just look to *Silver Spoons*.

AMERICA LOVES TO PICTURE ITSELF as the star of the movie, a self-image that is not unearned. We defeated the Nazis and the Japanese at the same time. We flew food and supplies into Berlin for 11 months straight. We won the cold war. Some fine early work! But time has passed, and we cannot move forward into the better days we deserve until we face a hard truth: America is no longer the strapping young hero. We are now the child star in middle age.

The early critical admiration was well deserved. Our victory over the Confederacy at such a young age—that's Ricky Schroder, age nine, becoming the youngest Golden Globe winner for Franco Zeffirelli's *The Champ*. Defeating fascism in Europe? Schroder's prime-time run on *Silver Spoons*.

But now we're screaming the language of war at schoolboard meetings, threatening health experts, railing publicly and proudly against any suggestion that we do the least we can to keep one another safe. You know what that is? Ricky Schroder losing his shit at a Costco greeter for asking him to wear a mask. That's the temper tantrum of the cocky and coddled.

That's poor form.

Acclaim can be a healthy thing if you get it at the right time. If it comes to you as your identity is forming—whether you are a young person or an emerging imperial power—it can warp your self-image forever. *I have done good* becomes *I am good* becomes *I am not capable of being bad* becomes a Shia LaBeouf performance-art piece. In this way, early success develops into an actual burden, a roadblock on the path to true self-knowledge. Our country, damaged by praise and wealth in its impressionable years, reacts to criticism from abroad by saying, "If not for us, France would be speaking German." To say this in 2021—as someone who certainly didn't fight in World War II—is a younger Lohan sibling taking credit for *The Parent Trap*. It's stolen valor.

We've wrung the last drop out of our glory days. If we want to be praised again, it will have to be for the work that lies ahead. Look at it this way: Regina King got her Oscar for *If Beale Street Could Talk*, not for her iconic work on *227*.

British historian John Bagot Glubb said empires pass through several distinct phases, which the young and famous hit in the same order. In the Age of Pioneers, a new country is founded. Then the Age of Conquests, in which the new country usurps and overwhelms the more established powers around it. Our relationship with England comes to mind, as does Jaleel White's slow but resolute seizure of ABC's *Family Matters*. Ages of Commerce and Affluence follow, wherein the young empire makes vast amounts of money, which it spends on public works, if it's America. If it is Millie Bobby Brown, that's donating to UK hospitals for the Covid effort.

In there somewhere is an Age of Intellect, conjuring images of the moon landing, or of Brooke Shields graduating from Princeton with honors. The last stage is the Age of Decadence, marked by defensiveness, greed, frivolity, and arrogance. See: Danny Bonaduce getting arrested for possession charges after appearing on a show for teens with an antidrug message.

Glubb said the Age of Decadence leads to collapse, which is grim, and also proof that he never got to see *The Drew Barrymore Show*. Redemption is rare, but it can happen. At 245 years old, we are running out of chances, but I insist our best work can be ahead of us. We must pull out of our Ricky Schroder tailspin and do as his *Silver Spoons* costar Jason Bateman did on *Arrested Development*: step back, be a team player, let Jessica Walter get the attention once in a while. Who we were then matters less than who we will become; now we need teamwork, empathy, self-awareness. Falling back on the tropes that made us famous—individualism, exceptionalism—leaves us like Kirk Cameron, sadly blowing out birthday candles, surrounded by five-dollar footlongs.

Decline is not inevitable. A comeback remains possible. But like anything one takes on in middle age, it requires discipline, humility, and tons more stretching than we think is necessary. To grow into our midlife potential, we must be willing to face hard truths and admit our shortcomings. We must resolve to learn from them so that we can maybe one day "achieve and cherish" that "just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations," that Lincoln so memorably wished for but that eludes us still.

I retain hope for a new age of American greatness, just as I do for Lindsay Lohan's eventual Academy Award. But we've got work ahead of us. What I recommend for America in late 2021 is what I would prescribe to an Aaron Carter with a fresh face tattoo: one long, honest look in the mirror.

I retain hope for a NEW AGE OF AMERICAN GREATNESS, *just as I do* FOR LINDSAY LOHAN'S *eventual* ACADEMY AWARD. *But we've got* WORK AHEAD OF US.

Our Most Disappointing Americans

LATE 2021 EDITION

JACOB CHANSLEY

WHO?
The QAnon Shaman, who broke into the Capitol building and hoped to escape notice by painting his face and wearing horns.

WHY?
After cutting a plea deal with federal prosecutors, Chansley's lawyer requested that "future references to him be devoid of the use of the letter *Q*."

CHILD-STAR EQUIVALENT
Rebrands are hard, especially right after splashy debuts. Ask Elizabeth Berkley in 1994, fresh off *Saved by the Bell*, ready to enjoy some artistic credibility, signing on to *Showgirls*.

THESE PEOPLE

WHO?
Two unnamed women at an anti-mask protest, on a rare morning off from being rude to the waiter.

WHY?
The sheer nerve of assuming Ph.D.-level virology expertise while openly failing fourth-grade spelling…

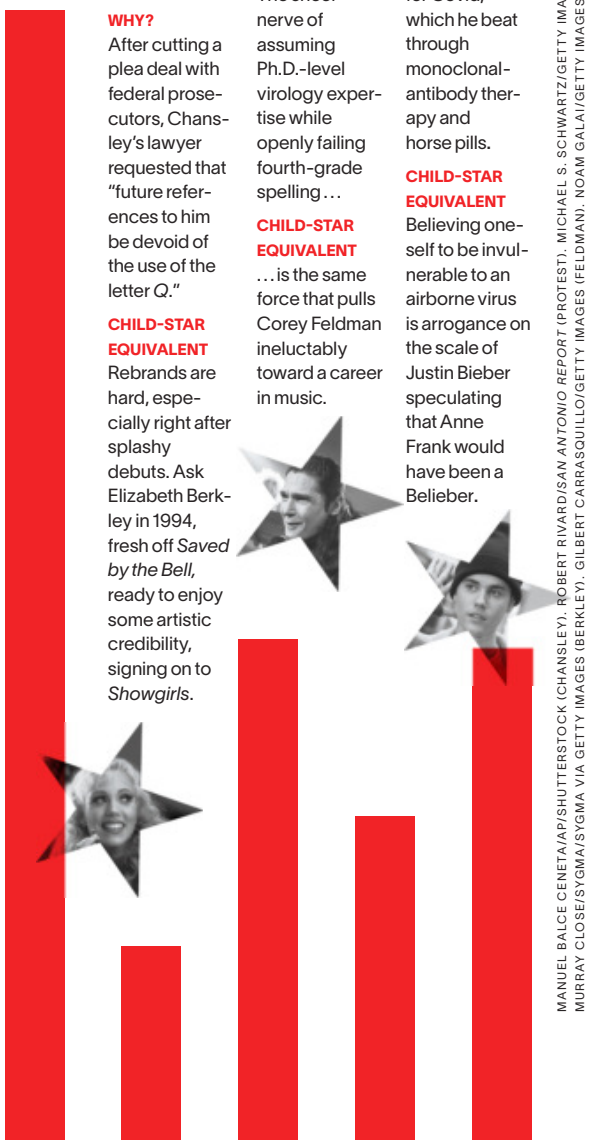
CHILD-STAR EQUIVALENT
…is the same force that pulls Corey Feldman ineluctably toward a career in music.

JOE ROGAN

WHO?
Podcaster and fire hydrant.

WHY?
Following a run of mask-agnostic indoor shows in Florida, Rogan tested positive for Covid, which he beat through monoclonal-antibody therapy and horse pills.

CHILD-STAR EQUIVALENT
Believing oneself to be invulnerable to an airborne virus is arrogance on the scale of Justin Bieber speculating that Anne Frank would have been a Belieber.



MANUEL BALCE CENETA/AP/SHUTTERSTOCK (CHANSLEY). ROBERT RIVARD/*SAN ANTONIO REPORT* (PROTEST). MICHAEL S. SCHWARTZ/GETTY IMAGES (ROGAN). MURRAY CLOSE/SYGMA/SYGMA VIA GETTY IMAGES (BERKLEY). GILBERT CARRASQUILLO/GETTY IMAGES (FELDMAN). NOAM GALAI/GETTY IMAGES (BIEBER).

SKECHERS®
skechers.com

TAGHEUER.COM

TAG HEUER

CARRERA

"I've learned not to take time for granted. What drives me is knowing that the clock is ticking."

Ryan Gosling

License to Swill

The James Bond of Ian Fleming's novels drank an alarming amount, and his consumption included much more than martinis—like Miller High Life. (Hey, it is the Champagne of beers.) **BY NICK SULLIVAN**

With bottles pulled from Fleming's pages, this cart shows that Bond's drinking diet contains multitudes, from high-end Dom Pérignon to classic American whiskey (like I. W. Harper, bottom left) to the very accessible Gordon's gin.

DECANTER ($225), MARTINI GLASS ($95), TUMBLER ($95), AND ICE BUCKET ($295) BY **RALPH LAUREN HOME;** VINTAGE ROYAL NAVY ICE BUCKET, COURTESY **@CROWLEY_VINTAGE.**

THE JAMES BOND of the movies is known to enjoy a martini or two, but he is an utter lightweight compared with the 007 of Ian Fleming's original novels and short stories, published between 1953 and 1966. There, Bond reportedly consumes 317 drinks. His average weekly intake is 92 units of alcohol, or four times the safe amount for a male adult.

Drinking that many of one cocktail would be terribly boring, of course. Fortunately, Fleming's Bond consumes more than martinis. His palate contains multitudes. He drinks bourbon and Scotch but prefers the former. (Fleming retrofitted a Scottish provenance to Bond after seeing–and liking–Sean Connery in his first outing, in *Dr. No*.) He downs plenty of bubbly–Taittinger is a favorite–as well as the Champagne of beers, Miller High Life. And he isn't such a stalwart of the vodka martini as the 007 of the movies: He has 16 gin and 19 vodka martinis in the books.

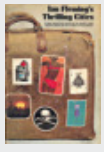
The excessive drinking was certainly a product of the era but also points to an egalitarian streak (High Life and bourbon) and hints at a troubling darkness to Bond. In other words, the booze helps soothe his demons. The superspy's appetite for alcohol is downplayed, somewhat, for the screen, likely for commercial reasons. In 24 movies, 007 drinks just over a third the amount he consumes in 14 books. Only Daniel Craig, perhaps as a nod to the books, has attempted to show Bond's liking for a tipple or three as anything other than suave.

Meanwhile, many of Bond's biggest nemeses can be described as teetotalers. In the eyes of both Fleming and Bond, abstaining from alcohol is suspect and pretentious. Even for megalomaniacs.

PROP STYLING: MICHAEL STURGEON

Breakfast Like Bond

He liked those eggs fluffy. And with Champagne.



Bond had to eat, too. The books contain loving descriptions of 007's favorite foods, but in *Ian Fleming's Thrilling Cities,* a decadent recipe for "Scrambled Eggs 'James Bond,' " given in a footnote, is an invite to brunch like a spy. Melt four ounces of butter in a pan over low heat, then constantly whisk a dozen eggs until they're "slightly more moist than you would wish for eating." Remove from heat, add another pat of butter, keep whisking, add chopped chives, and serve on toast—that's been buttered, naturally. These are melt-in-your-mouth eggs. Copper dishes are recommended, as well as "pink champagne (Taittinger) and low music." If you can get part of the way there with bubbly and tunes, that's Bond enough for most.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BEN ALSOP

YOU'VE GOT MAIL

Does it suddenly feel as if everyone is asking you to subscribe to their newsletter? That's because they are. Email editorials are experiencing a remarkable boom, thanks to services like Substack. But they don't all belong in your in-box. These seven are worthy of your time, attention, and almighty contact info.

INTERNET CULTURE

embedded

A SHARP, fun newsletter from Kate Lindsay and Nick Catucci for the perpetually logged on—or for those who aren't and need a reader's digest. Turn here for levity and insight via Q&A's with Very Online personalities, plus reflections on how to send invitations to casual events in a post-Facebook world. —LAUREN KRANC

SPORTS-ISH

THIS HERE NEWSLETTER

Will Leitch's regular missive encompasses sports, parenting, movies, culture, Wilco lyrics—a little bit of everything. But like a newspaper columnist of yore, Leitch always comes off as an old friend who has become a very good pen pal. —DAVE HOLMES

READING

BOOKS ON GIF

THROW A STONE ON THE LITERARY INTERNET AND CHANCES ARE YOU'LL HIT A QUALITY BOOK REVIEW, BUT ONLY HERE WILL YOU FIND SUCH WRITE-UPS PUNCTUATED BY PITCH-PERFECT GIFS. FEATURING ECLECTIC DEEP CUTS LIKE *REBECCA* AND *THE BELL JAR*, BOOKS ON GIF IS A BRILLIANT HIGH-LOW FUSION OF AN OLD ART FORM AND A MODERN STORYTELLING DEVICE. —ADRIENNE WESTENFELD

PARENTING

THE NEW FATHERHOOD

There's a lot of good advice and inspiration out there for moms. Less so for dads. The New Fatherhood fills this gap in a big way—with honest, useful, and frequently humorous dispatches. Think of it as one big group text with other guys fumbling their way through parenthood. —MICHAEL SEBASTIAN

GOSSIP/CELEBRITY

HUNG UP

Part culture, part ephemera, Hunter Harris's letter always includes what you wish you'd thought of about the most important moment in celebrity news that week. —KELLY STOUT

STYLE

BLACKBIRD SPYPLANE

The intersection of Newsletter Culture and Fashion Culture is fraught (read: It can get a little obnoxious and alienating, and fast), but Blackbird Spyplane manages to wrangle the weird and wonderful in a way that feels, if not super accessible, at least entertaining and understandable. Head here for everything that's under the radar—for now. —JONATHAN EVANS

POLITICS

POLITICS WITH CHARLES P. PIERCE

Okay, so we're a little biased. But where else can you find a discussion of the early-1800s congressional debate over building the National Road and how that might inform today's arguments over infrastructure spending? Every Saturday, you'll find the very best of Charlie's wit, insight, and historical literacy, all in your in-box. —JACK HOLMES

GET ALMOST 100 HOURS MORE **PROVEN QUALITY SLEEP** PER YEAR*

Quality sleep is proven to help boost energy, recovery and improve wellbeing.
That's why we created the Sleep Number 360® smart bed for the best sleep in the world.
Designed to help you fall asleep faster and make a life-changing difference to your health and wellness.

Adjustable comfort on each side

Automatically senses and responds to you

SleepIQ® Score 83
Personalized insights for even better sleep

15 YEAR
15-Year Limited Warranty†

100-Night Trial‡

sleep number®

SCAN TO TAKE OUR BED QUIZ

*100 hours more proven quality sleep based on internal analysis of sleep sessions assessing sleepers who use multiple features of Sleep Number® products. Claim based on sleepers achieving over 15 more minutes of restful sleep per sleep session.†Limited warranty available at sleepnumber.com. ‡Restrictions and exclusions apply. Does not apply to adjustable bases, upholstered furniture, closeout/clearance or demo/floor model purchases or mattresses already exchanged under another In-Home Trial period. You pay return shipping. Refunds will be made to the original method of payment less original shipping/delivery fees. Visit sleepnumber.com for complete details. SLEEP NUMBER, SLEEPIQ, SLEEP NUMBER 360, the Double Arrow Design, and SELECT COMFORT are registered trademarks of Sleep Number Corporation. ©2021 Sleep Number Corporation

Mini Me

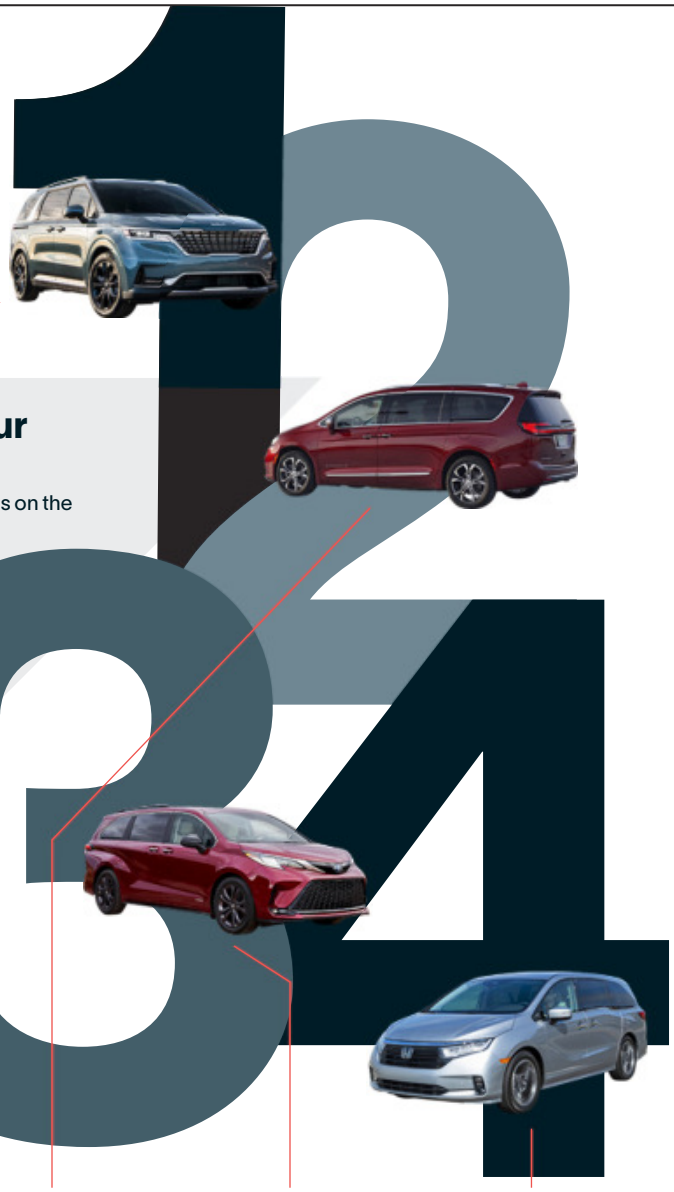
When you are in the thick of parent life, the utility of a minivan just might be the ultimate luxury **BY KEVIN SINTUMUANG**

YOU'VE HEARD the advice from other parents: "Savor this time. Soon your adorable children will ask for a TikTok account and stop returning your texts." You heed the advice. At first. Then, around the time school starts, you pine for your pre-kid existence. The slow burn into midlife has begun. If you're like many men, you will direct these feelings to your next car purchase. Not a sports car but a vehicle that gives you a hit of youth and seats a family comfortably. The auto industry knows this. That's why it invented the crossover, a not-too-big vehicle that moves the family but also looks like an SUV. There's a reason they're the fastest-selling cars in America.

The Rav4 is a Potemkin village. Instead, lean into the car tailor-made for Family Time: the minivan.

Yes, they still exist; no, they are no cooler than you remember them. Fatherhood can feel like stumbling through half wins and half failures, but when you're in a minivan, kids buckled into their captain's chairs with individual screens and climate control and all of their gear loaded in the back with space to spare, you will feel like Dad of the Year. You sacrifice off-road ability you'll rarely use, but you gain an interior similar to that of a first-class ride on Emirates.

It's okay to have this chapter of your life marked by the minivan. In fact, you might even enjoy it.



Choose Your Van, Man

The four best minivans on the market, ranked

1 Kia Carnival

From $33,275

It's the minivan in disguise—until you get inside. The top-trim model's reclining captain's chairs have footrests like a La-Z-Boy, and the interior appointments are Range Rover–like.

2 Chrysler Pacifica

From $37,315

Designed under the guidance of Ralph Gilles, the man behind the Dodge Charger, this is the *sexy* minivan. Plus, the plug-in hybrid version has the best fuel efficiency in the category.

3 Toyota Sienna

From $35,635

Opt for the Woodland edition and the Sienna becomes the outdoorsman's minivan, with all-wheel drive, a roof rack, and an extra 0.6 inches of clearance.

4 Honda Odyssey

From $33,515

It's the smoothest of the minivans and feels like the roomiest. That may sound boring now, but talk to me when you're 500 miles into an 800-mile road trip to Grandma's.

COURTESY BRANDS (VANS)

RULE *No.* 21 White cars are for narcs. Unless it's a Ford Bronco. **RULE *No.*** 200 The only finger you should give someone while driving is the thumbs-up. **RULE *No.*** 201 If you absolutely must deploy the middle finger, do so with the thumb pointing out.

Keep Going Forward

PROSPEX

140th Anniversary SEIKO

© 2021 Seiko Watch of America. SRPH57, SRPH59, SRPH55.

Oceanic Society

SEIKO U.S. SPECIAL EDITION

Seiko Prospex is an official sponsor of Oceanic Society, America's first ocean conservation non-profit, and its global work to study and protect endangered sea turtles. The alliance continues Seiko's long commitment to supporting the conservation and exploration of the world's marine environment.

SEIKO

SINCE 1881

AVAILABLE OCTOBER 2021
FOR MORE INFORMATION VISIT
SEIKOLUXE.COM

"With First Republic's support,
we can continue to thrive in uncertain times."

THE URBAN GRAPE

TJ Douglas, Co-Founder and CEO (left); Hadley Douglas, Co-Founder and CMO (right)

FIRST REPUBLIC BANK

It's a privilege to serve you®

(855) 886-4824 | firstrepublic.com | New York Stock Exchange symbol: FRC

MEMBER FDIC AND EQUAL HOUSING LENDER

THE ENDORSEMENT

Your Now and Forever Shirt

The white oxford-cloth button-down remains undefeated

WHY IS IT SO hard to find a good oxford-cloth button-down? In the past few years, this pillar of the American wardrobe seems to have vanished. Or rather the ones we want to wear have. So much of style is subjective, but there is at least one objective sartorial truth: A flimsy white shirt isn't a good investment. It's a damn shame.

If you want to really wear your clothes—like, into the ground—it pays to sleuth out the heaviest cotton you can find. Crunch is important. This version, from Thom Browne, probably weighs twice as much as those other dress shirts. It's twice as good, too.

When new, it has a robustness that echoes the built-to-last clothes of your grandfather's generation. As it ages, things get interesting. Collar and cuffs fray until your button-down settles into a long old age denied to lesser shirts. If there's a word for that fleeting moment, just before it disintegrates, when it achieves existential perfection, we'd love to know what it is. Most of our clothes never get there. —Nick Sullivan

SHIRT ($425) BY **THOM BROWNE.**

PHOTOGRAPH BY JENNIFER LIVINGSTON

ROBE ($415) BY **CDLP;** LOUNGE SET ($350) BY **B|M|C;** SLIPPERS ($525) BY **LORO PIANA;** NECKLACE BY **DAVID YURMAN.**

Put Your PJs on a Pedestal

This fall's best loungewear really is that good

BY BEN BOSKOVICH

WHEN'S THE LAST time you thought about your pajamas? I mean actually thought about them, as in, *What am I wearing to bed tonight?* Been a while, surely. But just as we're all embracing getting dressed for life again, we should make getting dressed for bed—or for brunch in your own kitchen, or for your run to grab the morning paper—not just a chore but a celebration. The goal is an ensemble that sucks all the Big Languishing Energy out of what you've been wearing at home and makes your partner look at you the way Beyoncé looks at hers over breakfast in the "Partition" music video. Because you and your pajamas deserve this renaissance, and even if nobody ever really "woke up like this," it doesn't mean you can't try.

Start with the robe of all robes, pair it with a pj set fit for a modern magnate, and add some slippers you won't find in a hotel closet. Turn the page to see what we're talking about.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ANDY JACKSON

LUXURIOUSLY APPROACHABLE

JUSTIN's Cabernet Sauvignon is America's #1 luxury Cabernet due to the bold flavors derived from our artisanal approach and the naturally limestone-rich soil of Paso Robles, California. Every bottle is crafted with care—hand-harvesting, hand-sorting, and oak barrel aging—to produce a balanced, elevated red.

Exceptional from every angle.

justinwine.com

© 2021 JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery LLC, Paso Robles, CA. All Rights Reserved. JUSTIN, EXCEPTIONAL FROM EVERY ANGLE, and the accompanying logos are trademarks of JUSTIN Vineyards & Winery LLC. JV210715-02

"WE'RE TALKING ABOUT *EMBRACING LUXURY* DURING YOUR REM CYCLE AND YOUR MORNING ESPRESSO."

THE SHORTS

All shorts are you-can-sleep-in-them shorts, unless, of course, we're talking about Tekla's poplin sleepwear shorts. These, my friends, are pajama shorts. Stone-washed for extra softness and borrowing vibes from the same low-inseam styles you wore outside all summer, they're a big step up from the mesh pair you've lived in since college.

SHORTS ($100) BY **TEKLA.**

THE ROBE

The opulently flowing robes that inspired some of your favorite outerwear pieces deserve to be flexed in their natural habitat. This 100-percent-linen job from the textile masterminds at Loro Piana won't just add a layer of (very breathable) luxury to your late nights and early mornings; it'll finally curb your urge to steal one from your favorite boutique hotel. (C'mon, man. You don't know where that thing's been.)

ROBE ($1,750) BY **LORO PIANA.**

THE SLIPPERS

None of this is supposed to be hard work—and that means we've got no time for in-home footwear that requires bending over to squeeze into. Instead, slip on something you love—but don't stop there. Grab a pair like these handmade mules from Artemis. The character is woven in, and they're made by Turkish cobblers whose families have being doing this for generations. Once they're broken in—and this will take a bit of time—it's going to be really hard not to take these bad boys for a spin outside. But if you can muster up the willpower, they just might outlast you.

SLIPPERS ($248) BY **ARTEMIS DESIGN CO.**

THE PAJAMAS

In May 2011, at the famously stylish Cannes Film Festival, Ryan Gosling wore a blue Ferragamo pajama shirt with white piping that served as a sartorial wake-up call. The interest of the menswear-loving populace was piqued. But only briefly. We flirted with a pajama boom, then returned to sleeping in boxers and tees. This set from Charvet is your ticket back to Cannes via your bedroom, because we're not talking about pj's as outside clothes anymore. We're talking about embracing luxury during your REM cycle and your morning espresso.

PAJAMA SHIRT AND PANTS BY **CHARVET.**

STYLING: ALFONSO FERNÁNDEZ NAVAS. GROOMING: KOJI ICHIKAWA/THE CLUB NEW YORK USING LAICALE. MODEL: DAVID AGBOJI/NEXT MODELS. PRODUCT PHOTOGRAPHS: DANIELLE OCCHIOGROSSO. PRODUCT STYLING: MIAKO KATOH.

TUDOR

#BORN TODARE

What is it that drives someone to greatness? To take on the unknown, venture into the unseen and dare all? This is the spirit that gave birth to TUDOR. This is the spirit embodied by every TUDOR Watch. Some are born to follow. Others are born to dare.

42 millimeter titanium case with helium valve

Snowflake hands
A hallmark of TUDOR divers' watches since 1969

Manufacture caliber
MT5612 with 70-hour "weekend-proof" power-reserve, silicon hair-spring and COSC-certification

Five-year transferable warranty with no registration or periodic maintenance checks required

PELAGOS

TUDOR BORN TO DARE AND PELAGOS ARE ® TRADEMARKS.

TOURNEAU | BUCHERER 1888

No One Saw It Coming

Loro Piana's collab with Hiroshi Fujiwara might seem like a strange pairing. That's exactly why it's so good. **BY JONATHAN EVANS**

HAVE WE REACHED peak collaboration? Not yet. But in a world where KFC x Crocs is an *actual collab* that sold out in half an hour, you can be sure we've hit a fever pitch.

So how do you keep the art of collaboration fresh when it's become so commonplace? If anyone's able to unpack that question, it's Hiroshi Fujiwara, the man behind Fragment Design, which has worked with Moncler, Levi's, and Supreme and helped create some of the coolest Air Jordan 1's of all time.

Now, for the first time, Fujiwara is embarking on a collaborative endeavor under his own name with luxury Italian label Loro Piana. It's all a little eyebrow raising: a brand renowned for the preciousness of its clothes joining forces with a guy who delights in smashing things up.

"I thought it would be interesting to break through the existing brand image and see how far they would go to challenge it," Fujiwara explains. That meant injecting his own street-savvy perspective into fishtail-parka-inspired overcoats, distressed sweaters, hoodies, and even a tee with a new riff on the Loro Piana logo, something Fujiwara was "pleasantly surprised" the label was open to.

Speaking of logos, some collaborators are all too happy to slap a co-branded one on stock offerings and call it a day. But this 30-piece, genderless collection feels like a Loro Piana that's been shifted at the molecular level. It bears the DNA of both entities that helped create it in relatively equal measure. Fujiwara calls the process of getting there a "friendly rivalry," a way for the two brands to duke it out en route to "something unique and exceptional." We call it a damn-fine collaboration, one of the rare good ones. Semantics.

COURTESY LORO PIANA

FROM LEFT: HOODED SWEATSHIRT ($1,650), TROUSERS ($575), AND BOOTS ($990) BY **LORO PIANA FEATURING HIROSHI FUJIWARA.** SWEATER ($1,450), T-SHIRT ($450), SKIRT ($1,450), BOOTS ($990), AND SOCKS ($125) BY **LORO PIANA FEATURING HIROSHI FUJIWARA.** JACKET ($9,900), SWEATER ($990), T-SHIRT ($450), TROUSERS ($575), BOOTS ($990), AND HAT ($325) BY **LORO PIANA FEATURING HIROSHI FUJIWARA.**

CHANEL
BLEU
DE
CHANEL
EAU DE PARFUM
DISCOVER EAU DE PARFUM

BLEU
DE
CHANEL
EAU DE PARFUM

INTRODUCING

Bespoke Post x ESQUIRE

Issue Two

We teamed up with the fine folks over at Bespoke Post on an exclusive collection of premium goods to equip you handsomely for anything the day might hold. It includes:

An exclusive field watch by **Columbia** / A waterproof cardholder by **RAINS** / A shower bomb from **Rudy's** + two more everyday essentials.

GET YOURS AT BESPOKEPOST.COM/ESQUIRE

PUZZLE BELT BAG ($1,900) BY **LOEWE.**

What, Are You Scared of a Little Bag?

Stop worrying about slinging on a small carryall and start thinking about which one **BY JONATHAN EVANS**

WHAT IS IT WITH guys and bags? We're okay with briefcases and totes, but an alarming number of us are still afraid of carrying a smaller bag because, well, it might resemble a purse.

Maybe it's the specter of the European carryall. You remember the European carryall, right? In search of some Continental swagger, Jerry Seinfeld straps on a small black bag and has to convince folks it's not…a purse. We laughed in the '90s; we were less evolved. As with so many things style-related–dad shoes, relaxed jeans–*Seinfeld* was ahead of the curve.

Whether you choose to call it a crossbody, a pochette, or a European carryall, we're in the Golden Age of Bags. Not only are they useful–and damn, are they useful–but they add a whole other dimension to what you're wearing. Carry the Gucci x Balenciaga Jackie 1961 bag and you're telling the world you've got a weather eye trained on the upper echelons of fashion. Strap Loewe's Puzzle belt bag across your chest and you're nodding to Seinfeld while one-upping him, too. (Making a fanny pack look cool? He could never.) Stash your phone, wallet, and keys in a Telfar shopper and you're announcing you're part of the greater community of in-the-know artistic types.

Because a bag isn't just a bag; it's a signal. The only question left is: What kind of signal do you want to send?

DANIELLE OCCHIOGROSSO

ZENITH

THE FUTURE OF SWISS WATCHMAKING SINCE 1865

CHRONOMASTER
SPORT

WAY AHEAD OF THE CURVE

Samuel Beckett (above) knew what was up, casually slinging a Gucci hobo bag over his shoulder back in 1971. Suddenly, his turtleneck/sweater/trousers combo went from classical to a little subversive. He looked like a guy who knew something you didn't. He also looked confident. And cool. Take a page from his book and stop worrying. Just wear the bag and do your thing.

HOBO BAG ($3,200) BY **GUCCI.**

A BAG FOR EVERYONE

What do you do when your bags are so popular that hundreds of thousands of people (not to mention bag-buying bots) are digitally queuing up for a drop that has only about ten thousand units? If you're designer Telfar Clemens, whose beloved Shopping Bag has become known as the "Bushwick Birkin" for its cool-kid cachet—for evidence, check out (below, from left) Ashton Sanders, A$AP Ferg, and Ian Isiah carrying theirs during New York Fashion Week—you reinvent how you sell it in the first place. Step one was 2020's Bag Security Program, which allowed fans to preorder as many bags as they wanted. Step two is this fall's Telfar TV, an online and app-based channel that'll run constantly and occasionally display a QR code you can scan to buy a bag—including a new duffel shape. The catch? There are only as many bags available as there are viewers watching when the code pops up. Telfar's calling the new releases "drips," not "drops." We're calling them your best shot at getting a bag for yourself.

SHOPPING BAG ($202) BY **TELFAR.**

DANIELLE OCCHIOGROSSO (BAGS). SOFT GOODS STYLING: MIAKO KATOH. COURTESY FARABOLA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (BECKETT). COURTESY LEXIE MORELAND/FAIRCHILD ARCHIVE (SANDERS, FERG, ISIAH).

STYLE AGENDA

GO FOR BRONZE

Introducing TUDOR's most-iconic Black Bay Fifty-Eight timepiece, now available in bronze. Featuring a sleek bronze bracelet fitted with a brand new clasp and TUDOR "T-Fit" rapid adjustment system, this special edition piece is now available at the TUDOR boutique in NYC's Meatpacking District, in partnership with Tourneau.

Explore more on Tourneau.com.

FROM THE EDITORS OF Esquire

SELECT

Our brand-new membership club, Esquire Select offers boundless access to what you already love about Esquire including award-winning journalism, big acts of storytelling, celebrity interviews, fashion advice, cultural commentary, cocktail recipes and so much more. But we've also added a few things we hope will up the ante.

Become A Member Today

AND GET THE BEST OF ESQUIRE INCLUDING:

- The best damn magazine on the planet, six times a year
- Unlimited access to Esquire.com
- Access to every Esquire story ever published via Esquire Classic—plus a weekly newsletter
- Members-Only Discounts and Deals
- Unlimited access to Politics with Charles P. Pierce, including Last Call, a members-only newsletter

Join now to be a part of this new chapter in Esquire's story.

Head to esquire.com/signup or scan to join.

2021 Esquire Grooming Awards

The 62 Best Grooming Products for Men

Everything you could possibly need to look, smell, and feel your very best in 2021 **BY GARRETT MUNCE**

—

How we groom ourselves will always reflect our times, and let's face it, times are feeling a little different right now. As we reemerge into a changed world, how we want to look is changing, too. We're embracing long hair or paying more attention to our laugh lines. We're trying new soaps and colognes because seeing people for the first time in forever makes us want to smell, well, fucking incredible. We're shaking things up because the only choice is to move forward. And we need new products to make it happen. Our team tested hundreds to find the very best, no matter what your look is. Because looking good feels damn good. And who doesn't want to feel good?

WANT TO STOCK UP? GO TO ESQUIRE.COM/GROOMINGAWARDS TO SHOP FOR ALL THE PRODUCTS IN THIS STORY.

1. **PARTY COLOGNE**
Ralph's Club Eau de Parfum
Think of this as your favorite Polo cologne but in black tie. It leans heavily on woody notes made modern with the addition of lavender and clary sage for a mature, elegant feeling that turns every party into a night to remember. *$110*

2. **FRESH COLOGNE**
Ex Nihilo the Hedonist
This clean, modern, energizing scent blends notes of bergamot, vetiver, and cedarwood to create something both bright and a bit woody. As it dries down, musk shines through to bring out a sexy vibe. *$325*

3. **CAMOUFLAGER**
Frontman Fade
Zits have a habit of arriving at the worst time possible. Cover them up with this tinted acne cream, which camouflages their appearance and contains salicylic acid to fight them from the inside out. *$24*

4. **BEARD BALM**
Goodline Grooming Co. Beard Balm
A little goes a long way with this thick beard balm that gives your whiskers a surprisingly light and natural finish. A tiny bit smooths flyaways and keeps your beard in shape all day. *$10*

5. **AFTERSHAVE**
Furtuna Skin Forza d'Agrò After Shave Serum
Natural ingredients like spirulina and white nettle soothe post-shave irritation and calm razor burn immediately. Use it after you shave or as a face serum when you don't. *$145*

6. FACE SCRUB
Peter Thomas Roth Pro Strength Microdermabrasion Blackhead Eliminator
Not only do the tiny exfoliating crystals in this cream smooth away rough, dry skin without scraping, but there are also chemical and enzyme exfoliators to remove debris down in pores. *$68*

7. SHAVE CREAM
Method Men Shave Cream
Who needs gobs of lather when you have a moisturizing cream that softens hair to make shaving easier and leaves skin feeling smooth and fresh? *$7*

8. MANUAL TOOTHBRUSH
Oral-B Clic
A manual toothbrush that gives an unparalleled clean is great and all, but this one goes over the top by offering replaceable heads, which means 60 percent less plastic waste over two years compared with traditional toothbrushes. *$25*

9. NIGHT CREAM
Harry's Hydrating Night Lotion
Skin regenerates at night; using this lightweight lotion before bed gives your cells the moisture and protection they need to perform at their best. *$9*

10. LIP BALM
Crabtree & Evelyn Nourish + Renew Lip Balm
Shea butter, apple extract, and black-currant-seed oil make this balm ultra-moisturizing. And the fragrance-free formula makes it way more grown-up than that cherry-flavored stick in your pocket. *$16*

11. STYLING CREAM
Sachajuan Ocean Mist Hair Cream
This cream is essential for medium and long hair. It has just the right amount of hold and zero crunch, and it smells even better than the fancy beach house you sprang for last summer. *$34*

12. SCALP PRODUCT
Briogeo Scalp Revival Charcoal + Tea Tree Cooling Hydration Scalp Mask
Let this mask sit on your scalp for ten minutes, and bask in the cooling sensation of peppermint and tea-tree oils. As you wash it out, the charcoal takes dirt and debris with it. *$32*

13. EXFOLIATOR
Skinfix Resurface+ AHA/BHA Niacinamide Exfoliating Pads
Swipe one of these pads over your cleansed face a few times a week and the cocktail of exfoliating acids will help lighten dark spots while keeping your skin clear and your face bright. *$50*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY BEN ALSOP

14. CURL STYLER
Playa Super Seed Curl Defining Crème
This lightweight cream has just the right moisturizing-to-hold ratio to keep curls of all kinds healthy, defined, and frizz-free. *$28*

15. FACE CLEANSER
Ole Henriksen Truth Juice Daily Cleanser
The orange scent wakes you up with a smack of citrus, but the real reason to use this is the unmatched fresh feeling it gives your mug. *$28*

16. BEARD WASH
Every Man Jack Beard + Face Wash, Sea Salt
The creamy texture of this cleansing wash makes it feel like moisturizer for your beard, but it won't weigh down your whiskers, leaving them clean and crumb-free. *$10*

17. HAIR WAX
Old Spice Fiber Wax
Switch your shiny pomade for this natural-finish wax to get an instant upgrade. The flexible hold lasts all day, and the wax can be reshaped as often as you need. *$9*

18. UNEXPECTED COLOGNE
Aesop Erémia
Big concentrations of galbanum and yuzu in this spritz give the impression of wild foliage, while notes of petrichor (literally the smell of fresh rain) and concrete deliver an urban quality—like a city block being overtaken by nature. *$195*

19. HAND CARE
Côte Men's Manicure Set
This set includes everything you need to keep your digits in check: a file, clipper, and buffer, but also clear coat and nail polish if you're looking to level up. *$65*

20. BEARD TOOL
King C. Gillette Neck Razor
Keeping your lines crisp is a breeze with this razor, which is designed to shave close without irritating the sensitive skin on your neck. Each cartridge has a bonus trimmer to make that shape-up even easier. *$15*

21. ACNE PRODUCT
Soft Services Clearing Mist
Anyone with body acne knows that the hardest part is actually reaching the breakouts. This spray is easy to apply evenly on your back (no rubbing required) and contains both salicylic acid and zinc to help control pimples. *$26*

22. MOUTHWASH
vVardis Weissbad Revitalizing Mouthwash
This mouthwash is delicious and freshens breath instantly, but it's a winner because it helps protect against cavities and brightens your teeth. *$25*

23. ANTI-SHINE PRODUCT
Boy de Chanel Anti-Shine Toning Lotion
Use this cooling gel right after you wash your face to control shine all day long. Or use it as your moisturizer if you have oily skin. *$65*

24. ANTIPERSPIRANT
Degree MotionSense Coconut & Mint Dry Spray Antiperspirant Deodorant
You can't beat the clean scent of this deodorant, which keeps pits fresh but doesn't overpower your cologne. The spray formulation means it doesn't leave any residue on your clothes, either. *$6*

25. CANDLE
D.S. & Durga Tuberose Myrrhder
Light this candle before a soak in the tub and your bathroom is instantly filled with the warm, spicy-sweet scents of myrrh and vanilla, with a few florals thrown in for good measure. It's cozy yet somehow mysterious, too. *$65*

26. ELECTRIC TOOTHBRUSH
Philips Sonicare 9900 Prestige
Nothing tops the sheer teeth-cleaning power of this electric toothbrush, which senses when you're pressing too hard and automatically adjusts. It also comes with an app that'll help you improve your brushing habits. *$400*

PROP STYLING: MICHAEL STURGEON. COURTESY BRANDS (PRODUCTS).

27. SPICY COLOGNE
Acqua di Parma Oud & Spice
Wearing this cologne feels like having dinner in the middle of the world's fanciest spice market. The rich, enveloping scent of oud is complemented by warm cinnamon and earthy patchouli to create a feast for the senses. *$340*

28. POMADE
Hardworking Gentleman Light Hold Hair Paste
A paste that delivers all-day hold and doesn't flake off or dissolve even in high humidity? Look no further. *$22*

29. SHAMPOO
Huron Shampoo
Everything about this shampoo, from the subtle scent to the effective but gentle clean, makes it your best all-around shampoo for everyday use. *$14*

30. CONDITIONER
Drunk Elephant Cocomino Marula Cream Conditioner
The moisturizing power of plant oils and butters packed into this creamy conditioner is astounding. It leaves hair feeling healthy, smooth, and maybe even fuller. *$55*

31. TEETH WHITENER
Snow Teeth Whitening Kit
Apply some whitening serum, plug the LED mouthpiece into your phone, and in less than 30 minutes your teeth will emerge whiter than before. After two weeks, our teeth were blinding. *$149*

32. HERBAL COLOGNE
Hermès H24 Eau de Toilette
At first spray, this cologne blasts your nose with a bouquet of clary sage, narcissus, and rosewood. But the real magic starts once it dries down and a buzzy, metallic note emerges that makes it completely unique. *$105*

33. THINNING-HAIR PRODUCT
Hims Minoxidil 5% Foam
Nothing beats the clinically proven results of minoxidil for hair thinning, and this foam makes it easy to apply without overdoing it. *$30*

34. FLOSS
Burst Refillable Floss Set
This floss expands when it touches saliva, so it hugs every nook and cranny between your teeth. The charcoal coating helps reduce stains but also means you can see everything that comes out of your mouth (gross but satisfying). *$13*

35. ACNE SPOT TREATMENT
Cardon Prickly Pimple Patch
When you see a zit pop up, apply one of these patches immediately. The dissolving microdarts deliver acne-fighting salicylic acid below the surface to squash it quickly. *$19*

36. BODY SCRUB
Differin Acne Clearing Body Scrub
This gentle, daily-use body wash has dissolving vitamin-E beads for exfoliation and a low dose of salicylic acid to keep body breakouts in check. *$14*

37. TEXTURIZER
IGK No Limit Dry Volume and Thickening Spray
A few short sprays of this magical elixir instantly make hair look thicker and fuller without stickiness. Bonus: It looks even better on day two. *$31*

38. BODY WASH
Caswell-Massey Heritage All-in-One Body Wash
The invigorating herbal/citrus scent first sold us on this wash, and the cleansing moisturizers that leave your skin feeling fresh but not dry took it over the top. *$45*

39. EYE PRODUCT
Dr. Dennis Gross Advanced Retinol + Ferulic Triple Correction Eye Serum
The lightweight gel formula smooths on easily and sinks into your skin quickly without greasy residue. The retinol in it specifically targets signs of aging around your eyes. *$69*

40. FACE SERUM
Kiehl's Retinol Skin-Renewing Daily Micro-Dose Serum
The retinol in this serum is potent, but the dose is still small enough for daily use, which makes it perfect for beginners and pros alike. Use it every night to fight signs of aging, smooth uneven texture, and curb breakouts. *$60*

41. AQUATIC COLOGNE
Montblanc Explorer Ultra Blue Eau de Parfum
Spray this refreshing, marine-inspired scent whenever you want to keep the summer vibes on high. Citrus blended with salty aquatic notes and ambergris instantly make you feel as if you're catching waves. *$98*

42. LONG-HAIR STYLER
JVN Complete Air Dry Cream
Longer hair can take some getting used to, but this soft-finish cream helps it air-dry smooth and frizz-free. *$24*

43. FACE SUNSCREEN
Neutrogena Invisible Daily Defense Face Serum
You won't even know you're wearing sunscreen with this lightweight formula. It disappears on all skin tones without a white cast and yet still delivers the high-grade sun protection your skin needs. *$14*

44. DANDRUFF TREATMENT
Head & Shoulders Clinical Itch Relief Scalp Mist
Reach for this every time your scalp itches. The spray instantly soothes the scalp, and pyrithione zinc helps control dandruff. *$9*

45. FACE MASK
FAB Pharma Calamine Pore Purging Mask
The clays in this mask help clean out pores and control oil production, while the calamine helps soothe irritation. Use it once or twice a week to keep breakouts in check. *$30*

46. ALL-OVER SUNSCREEN
Vacation Classic Lotion SPF 30
Remember the tropical-scented sunscreens you used as a kid? This new screen smells exactly like that but rubs in way easier and without greasiness. It's the ideal formula for a sunscreen you'll actually want to use. *$20*

47. BEARD CONDITIONER
Scotch Porter Beard & Hair Conditioner Spray
Greasy beards are a thing of the past thanks to this lightweight leave-in conditioner. A few spritzes smooths whiskers and detangles wiry hairs. *$15*

48. BODY TRIMMER
Wahl Manscaper
We were blown away by how effectively this trimmer does its job (no need to go back over the same spot multiple times) and how easy it is to maneuver into hard-to-reach areas. *$60*

49. ROOM SCENT
Trudon le Diffuseur Spiritus Sancti
If open flames aren't your thing, set this reed diffuser on the sink during your nightly skin-care regimen to get the spicy, mystical feeling of incense without the fire hazard. *$240*

Elegance is an attitude

Simon Baker

LONGINES

shop online www.longines.com

The Longines
Master Collection

50. BEARD OIL
The Art of Shaving Black Pepper & Cedar Beard Oil
The subtle, spicy scent of this quick-absorbing beard oil made it a clear winner. It's not cloying or fake smelling and doesn't linger in your nostrils all day. *$34*

51. BAR SOAP
18.21 Man Made Grit Bar
This bar strikes exactly the right balance between exfoliating and moisturizing, making it ideal for those with sensitive skin. *$24*

52. DAY MOISTURIZER
La Mer Hydrating Infused Emulsion
Forget thick, oily moisturizers and pick up this emulsion instead. The watery formula instantly sinks into skin with no stickiness and keeps your face hydrated the whole day. *$250*

53. WOODY COLOGNE
Burberry Hero Eau de Toilette
The cedarwood in this dynamic fragrance is the star, but it's not heavy or overly woody thanks to the prickly juniper and spicy black pepper. It's the kind of cologne that invites people to lean in more—and isn't that the point? *$135*

54. NATURAL DEODORANT
Hello Sweet Coconut Deodorant with Shea Butter
This natural deodorant has more in common with a lotion than the stick you're used to. (It's all the moisturizing shea butter in the formula.) The summery coconut scent lasts all day. *$7*

55. EYE DEPUFFER
Jaxon Lane Bro Mask Eye Gels
Slap these hydrogel mini-masks under your eyes when you need to depuff bags, smooth fine lines, or just wake up your peepers after a late night. We like to keep them in the fridge for more cooling action. *$30*

56. BALM
Alaffia Africa's Secret Multi-Use Balm
Use this thick balm instead of old-school, petroleum-based versions. The natural ingredients, like shea butter and coconut oil, hydrate and protect dry, cracked skin just as well—hell, maybe even better. *$17*

57. BODY SERUM
Lord Jones Bump & Smooth CBD Body Serum
If you're not a lotion guy, use this lightweight serum weekly to smooth away rough patches and bumps easily. The CBD in the formula helps prevent irritation. *$60*

58. SKIN SOOTHER
Dr. Barbara Sturm Aloe Vera Gel
Slather on this cooling aloe gel (with 90 percent aloe vera juice) after you get sunburned, but also any time the skin on your body or face is feeling dry or angry. *$70*

59. BEARD TRIMMER
Panasonic Precision Power Beard, Mustache and Hair Trimmer
Inside is a powerful 9,800-cuts-per-minute motor that slashes through even the thickest chin whiskers in a flash. Outside is a dial that toggles through 19 different length settings in seconds. *$150*

60. CUSTOM HAIR PRODUCT
Prose Custom Shampoo
You can't argue with a shampoo (and more) that's customized to your hair, your environment, and even your lifestyle. Fill out a short quiz and it shows up to your door a few days later. *$25*

61. TOOTHPASTE
Colgate Renewal Whitening Restoration Gel Toothpaste
This impressively minty toothpaste leaves your mouth feeling fresh and your teeth looking whiter, and it helps protect your gums from gingivitis and inflammation. *$9*

62. RAZOR
Gillette Planet Kind Razor
The reusable handle is made from 60 percent recycled plastic, and everything else is completely recyclable as well, but the best thing about it is that it just plain works—and works damn well. *$12*

_50 51 _52 _53

Build Muscle with Plants!

Super-charge your health and your workouts

How to eat plant-based in five easy steps

All the protein you need at every meal!

Available wherever books are sold or go to
menshealth.com/plantbasedcookbook

HEARST HOME

THE BEAUTY IN LYING TO YOURSELF

by JOSHUA FERRIS

It's like the world has been rubbing our noses in it. Broken government. Police brutality. A global pandemic. Climate change. Awash in harrowing realities, the author, a novelist, discovers the sustaining power of everyday fictions.

PAWEL OPASKA/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

▷ NEW BR 05 GMT Automatic ⌀ 41mm ● 100m water-resistant bellross.com

TIME INSTRUMENTS
FOR URBAN EXPLORERS

Bell & Ross

I HUGGED MY FATHER GOODBYE FOR THE last time in a hospital room in March 2014. He was a seven-year survivor of pancreatic cancer. No one thought he'd make it much longer. He was laboring to breathe, and I was due on book tour. It was, he said to me, now or never, kid.

Pride insisted he climb from the bed on his own. He had to negotiate around half a dozen tubes. But then he opened his arms to me and I fell into them as I had been doing for forty years. He whispered that he loved me and we wept and shook in each other's embrace, the profoundest love and the profoundest loss expressed in one gesture.

Over our grief, neither of us could hear the cosmic laughter.

For it is never two sad jerks in a hospital room who decide the when and where of a last goodbye. He hung on for four more months, by which time the book tour was over and I was back at his bedside in the fresh hell of enlightenment: Final embraces do not get scheduled. Death toyed with him until he could no longer stand, or open his eyes, or speak. Our *final* final goodbye was a one-sided affair, uttered into the void.

That I had any control over death was the first illusion to crumble. The second fell the instant he died.

I believed there must be some compensation for watching a man die. Part of me even wondered if a cartoon angel might lift out of his still-warm body. Okay, not that, but . . . something. The loaded book that falls from the shelf. The providential bird that lands on the sill. There was nothing. He had his run. He breathed his last. The dumb oxygen tank beeped and respired until, ten minutes later, someone thought to turn it off. The peace and quiet were outrageous.

A FLAWED BUT DECENT MAN, MY FATHER had three children, four wives, and a dozen careers. He preferred dreaming big to a day's honest labor, which brought him grief. But he was eternally seduced by life and its possibilities. By the time their marriage ended, my mother despised him.

"I thought he was a con man," she said to me. I had decided to write a book about my father—grief will do that to the writer—and I was gathering facts on its behalf. "He was hell-bent on making a killing. I didn't give a damn if he made a killing. I just wanted him to make a living."

When she found herself pregnant with the con man's baby, she explained, she considered having an abortion. This was news to me.

"Wait," I said. "You mean with . . . ?"

I pointed at myself. She nodded.

"But in the end, I decided against it."

"So I gather," I said.

I was so disillusioned by death then, so beset by grief, and so uncertain about the point of life, that I had mixed feelings about whether she'd made the right decision.

WHY HAD SHE GONE THROUGH WITH IT? Why did she fall in love with a dreamer in the first place? Maybe she didn't know him. Or hoped to change him. Either way: I was the product of a romantic illusion.

Illusion is not just what glitters but what greases every joint and hinge. Beyond verification but not completely bonkers, illusion is best distinguished from delusion by example: However far-fetched my belief that one day I will be elected president of the United States, it isn't the patent absurdity of believing I'll be the nation's first president. That distinction belongs to George Washington—and I am delusional.

Illusions are more benign. Idiosyncratic yet universal. We grant them a grudging citizenship among our stricter sanities.

Once, my whole world was *Sesame Street*. But by ten, I could think only of playing for the Red Sox. At sixteen, it was the game of 9-ball and the girl next door. At twenty, I had dreams of an Airstream trailer and the bohemian life, but five years later I was shaved and showered and starting a career in advertising. I turned thirty in Brooklyn, when my whole life was a new bride and drinks with friends. I woke from each of these serial dreams always for some more serious business, my real life dawning at last, only to wake again, and again, and wonder: Where does the succession end?

A harder reality rains down on the man turning forty. He must eat better. He must drink less. He must get off his ass. He wakes to a life of curbs and limits. I turned forty the year my father died. When he expired, I was next in line. His death was brutal. I said goodbye twice; that he said it only once says it all. Was that my fate, too? Why, then, do anything? Why dream?

If all else was confusion and death, I could still take comfort in one thing: the book I was writing about my father. I had written novels in the past. I would write a different book this time. An honest account that would permit no illusion, distort nothing, hold fast the truth. It was, I thought, now or never, kid.

MEANWHILE, THE DISILLUSIONMENTS kept coming, and not for me alone. Trump was elected the night I turned forty-two. How many illusions vaporized that day? That democracy was eternal and wise. That history was progress and progress inevitable. When all that was revealed for bullshit, we were at last who we always were: a far cry from the fine folks in myth and song. And for four years running, we went off illusion cold turkey, replaced by a steady diet of bitter truths.

My stepfather had this little trick for whenever the dog relieved itself inside the house: He would seize it by the neck and thrust its snout to within an inch of the offending turd. No matter that the dog had long forgotten its culpability in this charade. The big man was teaching a lesson—in human cruelty, if no other. The poor beast would try digging in, eyes wide, but it could find no stay on the tile floor, and the man held it fast. It was crucial to the sadist that the dog stare long and hard at the mess it had made. This seemed the cardinal exercise of Trump's time in office: clamping the populace by the neck and forcing it to stare at the fact of its own excrement.

Those next few years did more damage than can be measured in inventories of lies and cruelties. We entered not only the obvious national crisis, but a significant subconscious one that could have assumed the title of a Flannery O'Connor story: A good man is hard to find. Men like me—white, straight—had to abandon the illusion that we stood for anything good. Even what passed for goodness might have been little more than self-serving constructs by those who stood to benefit from it the most. A good man was a hall of mirrors.

WHAT *I needed* WAS NOT MORE BRUTAL TRUTH *but* A *good* REASON TO GO ON.

As these modern times piled up, I began to take less comfort in the true account I was writing. Was illusion the real enemy? Or was it disillusionment? Partisan politics, grotesque lies, police brutality, terrorism, drone strikes, atomic bombs, climate change: The death of dreams extended to the breaking point. What I needed was not more brutal truth but a good reason to go on. Piling up the cold hard facts of my father's life, while necessary to acknowledge, did nothing to inspire or delight and left out so much that was essential: his optimism, his vitality. It was as if, by focusing exclusively on the (continued on page 117)

LEFT TO RIGHT: Double-Wrap Tiger's Eye Bracelet in 14k Gold Over Sterling Silver, $400; Cable Link Chain Bracelet, $649; Cable Link 22" Chain Necklace in Gold-Tone Ion-Plated Stainless Steel, $225; 2-Pc. Set Box Link 22" Chain Necklace and Bracelet in 14k Gold-Plated Sterling Silver, $650

macy's

Power Is on the Docket

The Supreme Court's upcoming term could render a FINAL VERDICT *on the success* or *failure* of the modern CONSERVATIVE MOVEMENT BY CHARLES P. PIERCE

CHRIS MORRIS (ILLUSTRATION)

THE SUPREME COURT OF THE UNITED STATES DROVE A STAKE THROUGH THE constitutional precedents that had protected a woman's right to choose for nearly fifty years. And it did so in the shadows. The state of Texas enacted an anti-choice law that not only was facially unconstitutional but also seemed to leave its enforcement in the hands of citizens, essentially deputizing posses to track people seeking an abortion. This was clearly a scheme to avoid constitutional challenge, since it removed the formal power of the state to enforce the law. Whole Woman's Health, an organization dedicated to preserving the right to an abortion, asked the Supreme Court for an emergency order to stay the enactment of the law. By a 5-4 vote, without hearing oral arguments, the Supreme Court declined to do so on September 1, 2021, allowing the Texas law to stand and all but erasing abortion rights in that state.

The law was flagrantly unconstitutional, Justice Sonia Sotomayor wrote in dissent, but "a majority of the Justices have opted to bury their heads in the sand." And this wasn't the first magic trick that the court's new conservative majority pulled with its so-called shadow docket, either. Without hearing arguments, the court had ruled on issues as varied as pandemic regulations, the moratorium on evictions, and immigration law.

But this term, the court has actual oral arguments on the docket. Out of the shadows and into the light are cases touching on several of the country's most divisive issues, like gun control (*New York State Rifle & Pistol Association* v. *Bruen*) and reproductive rights (*Dobbs* v. *Jackson Women's Health Organization*). In both cases, the Supreme Court's conservative majority, the product of a long march by movement conservatives beginning decades ago, will produce decisions that are either definitive statements of that movement's final success or proof that the movement is played out, exhausted by its own self-contradictions and overtaken in political power by a Republican base that has run amok.

It was during the 2012 campaign that I realized that the formal structures of our two major political parties had been rendered ineffective in a number of serious ways. The most immediate cause was the torrent of money loosed into the system by the Supreme Court's decision in *Citizens United* v. *FEC*. There was no possible way for the institutional parties to control the flash flood of legalized influence peddling. Where once only renegade billionaires like Ross Perot could self-finance a campaign, the new system enabled anyone to dodge the party structure. In the case of the Republicans, this allowed candidates of varying degrees of eccentricity a seat at the grown-ups' table.

The change was gradual but steady. In 2007, three of the ten candidates running for the GOP presidential nomination backed away from Darwin's theory of evolution. Later, Sarah Palin's cosmic ignorance made its debut on the national stage. In 2012, Mitt Romney basically ran against the Massachusetts health-care blueprint that he'd planned to make the basis of his 2008 presidential campaign, a monumental bit of backtracking that seemed to make perfect sense in the face of a party base run wild. And then, of course, came Donald Trump.

That's where the modern conservative movement finds itself as the Supreme Court opens its term. The movement has spent three decades crafting this moment in the federal courts while its political salience has drained toward the party's extremes. Now, in a manner far beyond the accusations regularly made by movement conservatives against liberals, those same conservatives are depending on their own activist judges to give them policy wins to placate a base that has moved far beyond their control.

Because their ideas kept getting beaten by reality. Small government and deregulation are good applause lines, but the real world keeps getting in the way. George W. Bush got his tax cuts, his deregulation, and his wars. But the wars went sour, Hurricane Katrina exposed a debilitated American government, and then the economic collapse of 2008 blew it all up at once. There was a time when the candidacy of someone like Trump never would have got to the starting line in Iowa. The party would have strangled it in the cradle. But the money is uncontrollable now—even the extremes have access to it—and conservatives need the Supreme Court to give them what they want while handing them the control they crave. We have arrived at the endgame.

Find more of Charlie's wit and perspective on Esquire.com.

SUPER CHRONOMAT
BREITLING
1884
BREITLING BOUTIQUE
NEW YORK • PHILADELPHIA • MIAMI • ORLANDO • TAMPA • SCOTTSDALE
DENVER • SAN DIEGO • SAN ANTONIO • WASHINGTON DC • LOS ANGELES
NASHVILLE • BEVERLY HILLS • SAN JOSE • HOUSTON • LAS VEGAS

WHAT DO I SEE?
BUNDLING MADE EASY
GEICO makes it easy to save when you bundle your home, auto, boat, cycle, or RV insurance.
Now that's a fortune we'd all like to get!
Visit GEICO.COM to see if saving more is in your future.
GEICO
GEICO.COM | 1-800-947-AUTO | LOCAL OFFICE

Some discounts, coverages, payment plans, and features are not available in all states, in all GEICO companies, or in all situations. Boat and PWC coverages are underwritten by GEICO Marine Insurance Company. Homeowners, renters, and condo coverages are written through non-affiliated insurance companies and are secured through the GEICO Insurance Agency, LLC. Motorcycle and ATV coverages are underwritten by GEICO Indemnity Company. GEICO is a registered service mark of Government Employees Insurance Company, Washington, DC 20076; a Berkshire Hathaway Inc. subsidiary. GEICO Gecko® image © 1999-2021. © 2021 GEICO 21_713267224

WE THINK... IT'S TIME... TO PARTY

Have friends over? It's been a while, but let's do it. Here are eight tips that'll help you ease into festivities again.

PHOTOGRAPH BY MARTYN THOMPSON

We could almost reach out and touch that disco ball on a velvet stick, couldn't we?

Everything was supposed to be normal-ish this fall and we could release our up-all-night, pent-up party energy into a vaxxed world. Then the pandemic got messy. Again. We sort of got hit with the stick.

But it's a velvet stick, right? The big party you wanted to throw at your home might not be the luxe bacchanal that you had conjured while fever-dreaming on fresh antibodies, but you can still clink glasses with a small group of vaccinated folks and not feel as if you're hosting the superspreader of the season.

Right? Maybe? Yes. Let's gently slide into entertaining at home once again. Let's take back the party. Away from Zoom. Away from shivering outside under a heat lamp. Let's put on some real pants, dust off that dinner jacket, and pretend, for a few hours, that there's nothing going on in the world but the conversations, the noshing, the laughter, the swirling of drinks in hand in the corners of a dimly lit room. No doomscrolling allowed.

You might be rusty—socializing with friends inside may seem like a throwback idea. But with the right mix of high, low, and collaborative, as laid out in the eight tips here, your reentry into semi-normal party life can be easy and as comforting as a glass of whiskey, neat. And just as fun.

1 GO BIG with Your BOOZE

There's just something about seeing a group of gargantuan bottles sitting on a bar cart or counter that says, "Hello! We're ready to party." Bottles filled with 1.75 liters of good booze—from brands like Maker's Mark and Patrón—just feel a little bit more special. The inclination to pick them up, hold them up like trophies, and pose for a photo for the 'Gram is kind of irresistible. Sometimes that's all you need for a welcome, but they're not just props. Set out a few of them with ice and some soda water and have guests pour themselves a refreshing highball, or hey, if you want to dive straight into something on the rocks, cheers. —KEVIN SINTUMUANG

2 SAY HELLO to My LITTLE FRIEND

A full-sized beer at a party is kind of a commitment. Like talking to only one person there when you'd prefer to move around the room. A mini beer, though? That's like a brief conversation. A snack. Stock up on Coronitas and those stubby Miller High Life ponies. You can always come back for more, and they will never turn lukewarm. —K. S.

COURTESY CORONA (SIX-PACK)

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAMIEN MALONEY

CLERMONT·KENTUCKY

DRINK SMART®
SHARE GENEROUSLY. DRINK RESPONSIBLY. BASIL HAYDEN® KENTUCKY STRAIGHT BOURBON WHISKEY.
40% ALC./VOL. ©2021 JAMES B. BEAM DISTILLING CO., CLERMONT, KY.

3 HAIL to the CHIP

No matter how many snacks you lay out in your party spread, if potato chips are in the mix, potato chips will win. The winningest variety for a party? These are fighting words, but I will say it's "The Crab Chip" from Utz. They're fried in cottonseed oil, for the ideal balance of crispiness, substance, and airiness, and tossed in Chesapeake Bay seasoning, the paprika-laden spice mix you find on steamed crabs in Maryland. It's the chip as hors d'oeuvre. Bonus: You can get a box of snack-sized ones on Amazon. Because even the vaxxed don't want to use a communal chip bowl. —K. S.

4 FIRE UP Ye Olde YOUTUBE PLAYLIST

As party hosts, we like for our guests to have some degree of control over the stereo. We like an egalitarian approach, a chance for the night to break free from the Spotify algorithm and go places that are unexpected and hand selected. We also like a multisensory experience, a little something visual to focus on as the night gets blurry.

We have come to rely on the collaborative YouTube playlist, and we can say from experience that it will take your party to the next level.

Your jam-band friend could easily dominate this medium if you let him, so don't. Set a strict maximum of two videos per guest until the playlist has run its course, and then everyone chooses two more. Create a group-mind effect by going in a specific order: You choose two, the second person in line makes their picks based on what you've sparked in them, the third VJ takes inspiration from the second, and so forth.

The collaborative YouTube playlist is reminiscent of late nights in the dorm watching MTV, except this time you get to choose what's in rotation. Best of all, those playlists live on forever. Years later, you'll remember the night that went from Megan Thee Stallion to LCD Soundsystem to a Jason Isbell in-store appearance. It's cooperative, it's easy, and it suits your pulverized attention span. Try it and thank us later. —DAVE HOLMES

5 LIVE the Life of (DIY) PIE

If there's one thing that will without fail guarantee an awesome party, it's the addition of one element: pizza. We know. Duh. Everyone loves pizza. But we're not talking delivery. The real way to impress guests is to make your own pie.

The first step is a dedicated oven that can heat up to the 800 degrees critical for perfect, chewy crust. The $799 Ooni Karu 16 you see here is compact and can use wood or gas. If you want to get fancier, try picking up a stone-surface number from Michigan-based Kalamazoo Gourmet.

Don't overcomplicate. Get ingredients for a margherita (dough, sauce, cheese, basil), then grab some old standbys (mushrooms, peppers) and some curveballs, too (hot honey). If you're short on time, have a gourmet outfit (like Del Popolo in San Francisco or Roberta's in New York) deliver some ready-made frozen wood-fired pizzas to your front door.

Eventually partygoers will get curious and gather around the oven. This is when you drop your apron and let the collaborative magic happen. Give your attendees a crash course in pizza making, then pour yourself a drink and enjoy the party. Hot slices will soon find their way to you. Yes, some will arrive a little burned, others a little doughy, and some might be topped with bizarre combos. (Ground beef and caviar? Okay!) But each of them will be made with love, the secret ingredient for perfection. —DANIEL DUMAS

COURTESY OONI (OVEN)

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAMIEN MALONEY

YOU DON'T
JUST TASTE IT.
You feel it.
PHILADELPHIA
SINCE 1872
FIND THIS Brown Butter Pumpkin Cheesecake RECIPE HERE.
©2021 Kraft Foods

6

GO with the ROE

Caviar's THRIFTIER COUSIN is here to PARTY

Caviar isn't just something you find tiny amounts of on multicourse tasting menus at Michelin-starred restaurants. You can bring the same feeling of luxe to your next party, without breaking the bank, with a large tin of trout roe.

Though technically not caviar, trout roe provides a similar gentle oceanic salinity, but the larger, orange-colored pearls' pop is a bit more pronounced in your mouth. A 250-gram tin from Tsar Nicoulai, a pioneer of sustainable American caviar based in California, serves anywhere from twelve to eighteen of your besties and will set you back only $75.

Eat it on blini, sure, but we find that trout roe plays particularly well with the potato in any form, from tots to chips, and the addition of chives and crème fraîche makes for an elegant garnish. It's also excellent as a topper for bagels and cream cheese as well as pasta dishes, or even mixed into ranch dressing. Hell, put it on a waffle! Pair it with a dry rosé, or, if you go with the smoked version, a manhattan does just the trick. —OMAR MAMOON

7

LIP SYNCHING > KARAOKE. Discuss.

I started lip-synching in mixed company after drinking too much mulled wine at a Christmas party. If you've ever had mulled wine, you know that takes a lot of mulled wine. The song was Barbra Streisand's "Jingle Bells," and my performance was nothing short of bombastic perfection. But like most drunken masterpieces, the video of the performance has haunted me as an embarrassing relic.

Until recently, that is. In these After Times, there is no place for petty judgments. While karaoke may have once been king, a good lip synch is the natural evolution that can be done in anyone's home, with very little equipment required. All you need is a speaker (like the stylish, $599 Teenage Engineering OB-4 you see here), a total banger, and a showstopper of a routine. The challenge isn't in choosing a song that you know by heart but in the selling of the performance. Yes, you can sing the entirety of "Bohemian Rhapsody," but my guy, how does it make you feel? What are you telling me with your whole body when you're mouthing the words "I sometimes wish I'd never been born at all," and more importantly, are you going to tear up that air-guitar solo?

Turn it up to ten by hosting a lip-synch tournament. We're coming out of this pandemic with gusto, so yes, everyone in the room has to vote and perform. And if there's any hesitation about performing because you're still insecure around your friends more than eighteen months into a global pandemic, then you need to make new friends. –JUSTIN KIRKLAND

8

BECOME the Emperor of ICE CREAM . . . SANDWICHES

IT'S-ITS are where IT'S AT

I'm told that if you grew up in northern California, It's-Its are as common as, say, Klondike Bars. That's not a fair comparison, because It's-Its, as their wholesomely weird name alludes, are from another time, another dimension. There's no reasonable explanation for this, but as an East Coast boy marrying into a Cali family, I wasn't introduced to these treats until a visit last summer . . . and I feel cheated out of a decade's worth of them. For me, It's-Its should be in the same realm as the In-N-Out burger when it comes to culty Cali treats revered by out-of-staters. A scoop of ice cream in various flavors, from vanilla to mint to strawberry, surrounded by airy oatmeal cookies and dipped with an ever-so-thin layer of chocolate, they're not mushy and melty nor hard as a rock—the perfect consistency for a sweet treat that gives off the vibe of an artisanal dessert even though it comes out of a cellophane wrapper. (Cut them in half for the max presentation and shareability.) And now that they're available for shipping nationwide via Goldbelly, I have sworn that they will become a part of every party I throw. If only I could get In-N-Out mailed to me. —K.S.

COURTESY TSAR NICOULAI (ROE); COURTESY TEENAGE ENGINEERING (SPEAKER); COURTESY IT'S-IT (ICE CREAM SANDWICH)

PHOTOGRAPH BY DAMIEN MALONEY

Women'sHealth | Men'sHealth

Revamp Your Routine

Bluetooth Indoor Training Bike with ***MyCloudFitness App***

BLUETOOTH SMART TECHNOLOGY

MYCLOUDFITNESS APP COMPATIBLE

4.5 STAR RATING

MensHealth.com/WHMHFitness

Walmart.com | amazon

WHY LIMIT HAPPY TO AN HOUR?

100+ MARGARITAS, MIMOSAS, MARTINIS, JELL-O SHOTS, AND MORE!

Delish Ultimate Cocktails provides everything you need to make amazing drinks at home...and then some. Recipes include best-ever classics, insane ideas (like Flamin' Hot Cheetos Bloody Marys) and even fun mocktails — because everyone's invited for happy hour!

AVAILABLE WHEREVER BOOKS ARE SOLD!

HEARST HOME

STYLE AGENDA

SEIKO PROSPEX U.S. SPECIAL EDITIONS

With a design inspired by sea turtles, three new Prospex U.S. Special Edition Automatic Diver's watches with intricately patterned vibrant green, blue, and brown dials celebrate Seiko's official support of Oceanic Society's global work to study and protect the seven species of sea turtles. These special edition watches will be available in October online and in select stores.

seikousa.com

Oceanic Society

SEIKO
SINCE 1881

Men's Health | MVP

PREMIUM ALL ACCESS

Introducing the all-new MVP Premium membership tier from Men's Health, designed to help readers like you dominate your fitness routine by offering best-in-class workouts anytime, anywhere. Premium membership offers personalized expertise to help you meet and exceed your goals.

ENJOY ALL THE BENEFITS OF PRINT AND DIGITAL MEMBERSHIPS, PLUS:

- Access to Men's Health streaming workouts on the All/Out Studio app (value $89.99)
- Hundreds of on-demand workouts led by world-class trainers, with new fitness programs added each month
- MVP Essentials Kit (value $50) with products hand-picked by our editors
- A special discount off your next purchase at the Men's Health Shop

Unlock Premium today for less than $2/week

Sign up at menshealth.com/premium or scan to join.

WHAT I'VE LEARNED

Padma Lakshmi

TV HOST AND AUTHOR, 51, *New York City*
Interview by MADISON VAIN

_ **A GREAT DINNER PARTY** doesn't have anything to do with well-appointed linens or shiny silver platters. It starts with a good guest list. You want people who have some touchstone in common but don't necessarily know each other, people who will enjoy meeting each other.

_ **I LIKE TO LEAVE** things to the last minute. I cook most of the meal, go have a shower, have one glass of wine before anybody gets there. And then when people start arriving, have them help make a salad together–just to break the ice.

_ **THERE WERE MANY** aspects of quarantine I didn't mind. Stillness was one of them. But the problem with that stillness is that it was accompanied by such anxiety.

_ **I DIDN'T MISS** going out. I didn't miss a lot of the things the pandemic took away from me. I learned that I need very little, except for the people I love.

_ **I WOULD LOVE** to write more children's books. I think children can understand complex things so long as you explain them in words they can wrap themselves around.

_ **I REMEMBER** roller-skating all over New York City in the late seventies and eighties as a child. I have seen the opulent New York, and I have seen the grungy New York. I've lived in Queens, uptown, and now downtown. New York is only interesting when you have a diversity of people who can afford to live there. More and more, that's not the case.

_ **THE BIGGEST THING** I hope I can foster in Krishna, my daughter, is to listen to her gut. It's something my mother taught me when I was very young, and I hope I can cultivate that muscle–because it is a muscle.

_ **I DON'T GET** a badge for Good Indian Motherhood if my daughter suddenly parrots everything back in Hindi or Tamil. Culture is a respect for the family, not whether she wears Indian clothes or has a bindi.

_ **WE GASLIGHT** young women. We expect them to be smart and sexy and nice and ambitious–but not *too* ambitious.

_ **LIKE ANYTHING** powerful, beauty is a double-edged sword.

_ **I'VE ACTUALLY** started pulling back on my Twitter. I'm interested in using the voice I have appropriately, but at the same time, it can be a lot of noise.

_ **SOMETIMES** I don't think you should leave it to God. I think God has better things to do than get you that job promotion.

_ **GROWING UP** as an immigrant child, between two cultures, allowed me to learn to code-switch. It was useful when I started working in Europe. It made me more broad-minded; it taught me languages.

_ **FOOD IS** an easy gateway to the rest of a culture.

_ **WHAT AM I MOST** afraid of? Being a bad mom.

_ **I NEVER FELT** pressured to have a conventional family, because that did not work for me. I saw my mother feel a lot of shame because she was a divorcée in the early seventies–it's why we came to America.

_ **I DON'T WANT** to be cynical–if it gives somebody happiness, great–but for me, the whole idea of standing in front of a room with a bunch of people to talk about how much you love each other . . . who cares?

_ **YOU CAN HAVE** your heart broken at any age. You're so sure that this is going to work, but then it doesn't.

_ **MONEY HASN'T** changed me. I still have the same anxieties I had when I didn't have the resources I have now.

_ **IT WAS A VERY RASH** decision to write the op-ed [about being raped at age sixteen], but it was one I don't regret. I needed to, because another woman needed it for support. There's no upside to coming forward. The only upside is what happens for the women who come after you.

_ **TRAUMA DOESN'T** go away. It only becomes manageable if we deal with the pain of it.

_ **GROWING OLDER** gracefully means having a keen curiosity about learning things about the world that you didn't know yesterday, no matter how many yesterdays you've had.

_ **I DON'T FEEL** guilty taking pleasure in things anymore. I feel guilty that I didn't take pleasure more when I was younger.

_ **THE BEST UTENSIL** in the kitchen? The wooden spoon.

> I DON'T FEEL GUILTY TAKING PLEASURE IN THINGS ANYMORE. I FEEL GUILTY

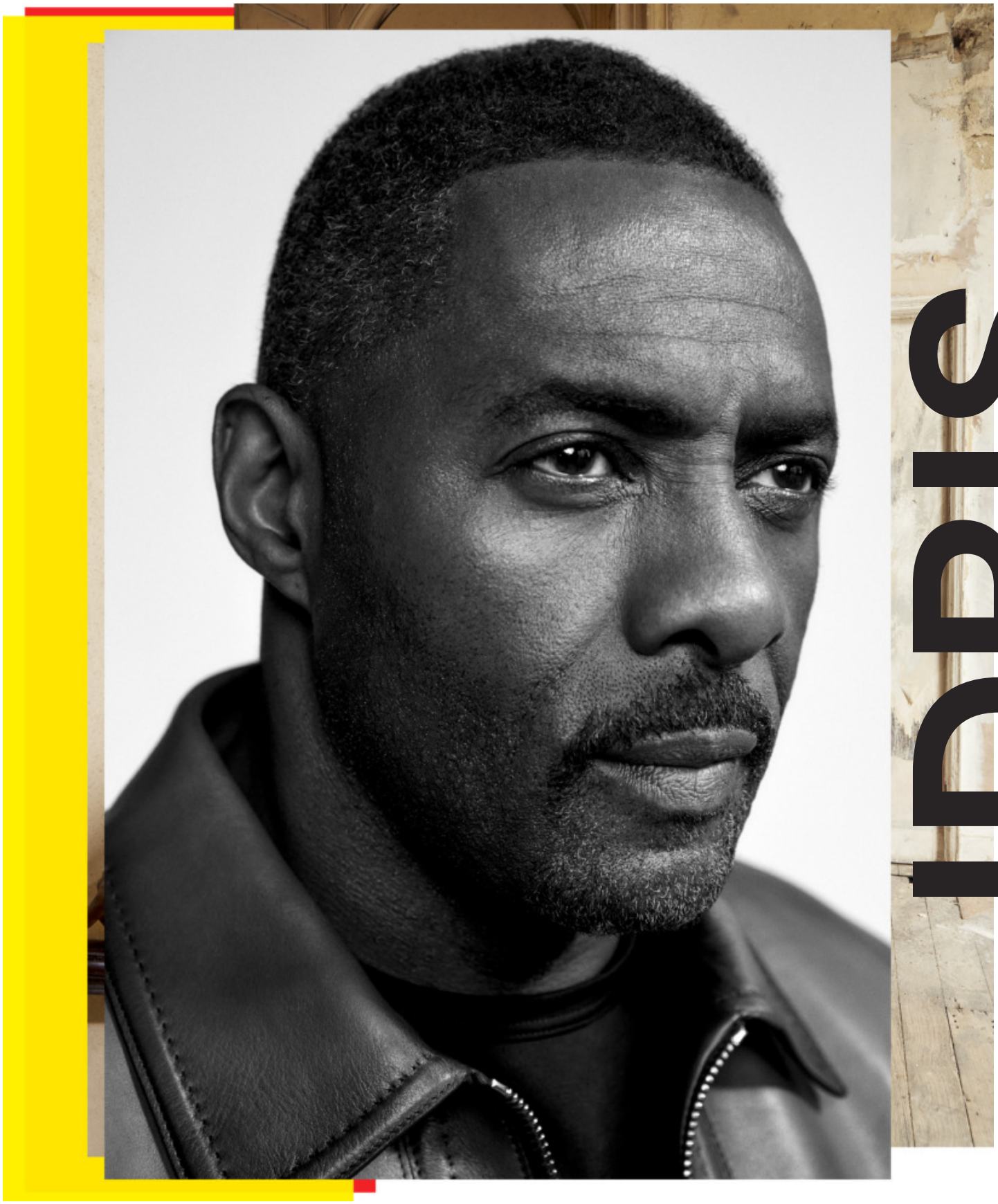
JENNIFER LIVINGSTON/TRUNK

THAT I DIDN'T TAKE PLEASURE MORE WHEN I WAS YOUNGER.

Last year should have been one of the most difficult of his life—after all, he sincerely thought he might die—yet the multitalented Englishman emerged from it as untouchable as ever

By Tim Lewis
Photographs by Adama Jalloh
Styling by Cheryl Konteh

the idris elba effect



Jacket by **Berluti;** T-shirt by **Sunspel.**

Jacket by **Givenchy;** polo by **Giorgio Armani.**

“I’m not allowed to just go out *and* get drunk

WHEN HE TESTED POSITIVE FOR COVID-19 IN MARCH 2020, Idris Elba was in New Mexico, just about to start shooting a western called *The Harder They Fall* with an all-killer cast that included Jonathan Majors, Regina King, and LaKeith Stanfield. Jay-Z was producing and lending a hand with the soundtrack; Netflix was footing the reported $90 million bill. Elba posted two live videos on social media from isolation in Albuquerque—one eight minutes long, the other almost eighteen—and they are notable for their lack of the composure and breeziness we have come to expect from him. He seemed, as the British say, to be bricking it. No offense to Tom Hanks, but it was when Covid-19 went after Elba—a man credible as both Nelson Mandela and the Norse god Heimdall, tipped at various points to be the first Black James Bond, an actor who seemed untouchable—that this shit got very real.

Elba, who is forty-nine, admits now that he sincerely believed his time might be up. But beyond the existential threat, he could see his world, which he had built from nothing, starting to unravel. *The Harder They Fall* shut down the day before it was due to begin shooting; no date was given for a return. "Having Covid at the time I got it, it was very, very early in its cycle," says Elba. "So it was like, 'Oh, shit, I'm going to die.' I could have easily been a statistic: went to a hospital and lungs failed and that's the end of it. Very easily. I've had friends whose families have died"—Elba snaps his fingers—"like that."

Although he's long recovered from the virus, Elba is still rattled. On an early-August afternoon, he is speaking to me during another period of enforced isolation: day one of a ten-day quarantine, spent in solitary confinement next to Heathrow Airport following a shoot in South Africa for a Baltasar Kormákur movie about a recently widowed man who has to defend himself and his two teenage daughters from a killer lion with PTSD from poachers. In the background of his camera view are the telltale signs of the midmarket chain hotel: art that inspires no emotion whatsoever, myriad variations on beige. Elba wears a snug black T-shirt and a black beanie perched jauntily on the top of his head while he holds his phone, which he will go on to do for almost two hours.

For such a revered guy, one of the more unsettling aspects of his announcement that he had Covid was the backlash. Ellen DeGeneres and Wendell Pierce, his costar from *The Wire,* sent their love on Twitter, but in the darker recesses, the trolls and conspiracy theorists went in. How had he snagged a test when he didn't have symptoms and even frontline workers couldn't get them? Why was his wife, Sabrina Dhowre Elba, who hadn't tested positive yet, standing behind him? A number of posters made comments along the lines of: "Blink twice if white people paid you to say this."

IT WOULD NOT BE ACCURATE TO WRITE THAT ELBA HAS NEVER known public opprobrium: He was in *Cats,* after all. But during a long, prolific career, he has proved resiliently beloved. Having played *The Wire*'s Stringer Bell, the greatest character on the greatest TV show ever, confers a lifetime pass. This, believe it or not, is his 475th appearance on the cover of Esquire. He is aware of this cherished status: He calls it his "credit card of goodwill." And due to Covid-19, that goodwill was rapidly depleted. Overnight, the Untouchable had become an untouchable.

"The good favor that some people in the public eye get—which I definitely benefit from—was gone in an instant. In an instant," he repeats. "People that loved me one moment absolutely fucking hated me the next." A wry laugh: "It was like, 'You're fake; you're being paid.' No one really believed. It was really a tough time. So where I am now, you're looking at a man that's very thankful. You're looking at a man that's very reflective of what's happened over the last eighteen months. You're looking at a man that doesn't really have time to waste on pretending to be anything but what I am. Who I am and what I am."

So who is Elba? What is Elba? Those eighteen months have given him plenty of opportunity to reflect on the disparity between reality and public perception. I've met him once before, in 2018, when he was enduring the pre-Covid version of enforced hotel quarantine: a junket to promote his directorial debut, *Yardie,* an ambitious, mostly successful adaptation of a cult novel about Jamaican gangsters in London. Today, he comes across as more raw, even bruised; certainly more questioning and introspective than he was even two years ago.

"The last year for me was very, very difficult," he says. "I wouldn't put it down to a lack of work or anything like that. I'd put it down to a real mental strain that I couldn't put my finger on, and where it came from. It manifests in waves of anger and, perhaps, depression. A little bit of a lack of, I wouldn't say optimism, but just a lack of joy, sometimes. And I haven't sat down and spoken to a therapist or anyone about it, but I suspect it's very linked to that time period."

Elba can only compare the experience to the death of his father from lung cancer in 2013. "The biggest loss I ever had was watching my dad die," he says. "I remember a profound feeling I had after that, which was like, 'Wow, oh, there is nothing after the day you die.' Looking at my dad, I don't know where he's gone, but the man that was lying there is gone. Not there. It was so final."

From the outside, Elba appeared to respond to his father's death in the most Elba of ways. He signed on for a documentary that would follow him from kickboxing novice to his professional debut in one year. He won that first fight, against an experienced Dutch kickboxer more than ten years his junior, by a knockout in the first round. Not long after, he met Dhowre, a Canadian model and activist of Somali descent, at a jazz bar in Vancouver. Elba had been adamant he would never marry again after two divorces, but Dhowre made him reconsider, and they tied the knot at a three-day festival in Marrakech in 2019.

"It looks amazing from the outside, but there's a lot of stuff that happens in the public eye that's not fun," says Elba. "I'm not allowed to just go out and get drunk and have a rant and get kicked out of a pub and then feel bad the next day. Part of your duty is to be an example. So what happens is there's a suppression of stuff coupled with grief. People might think, *You're all right; you got loads of money.* But it doesn't work that way. You're still human. I can't spend my money in my mind. I can't spend my money in my grief."

What saved Elba after his father's death, and helped again during the past year and a half as Covid rolled on, was his job. That's to say quite literally pretending to be anyone except Idris Elba. "You close your eyes and you're in a void," he explains. "A bit like a 3-D space, you look around and there's every single memory, every single experience for you to draw upon, while—while—you're playing someone else. I've always found a way to close my eyes and find myself in that void and go, '*Ahhhh!* On aisle number 34, there is that experience I went through that made me feel like that.' And virtually grab that and throw that into my work. It sounds pretentious, but it's definitely how I can keep working even through stuff that's really hard to deal with. I use my work, I throw it into my work."

That work is coming fast right now. You perhaps saw Elba as Robert DuBois, aka Bloodsport, in *The Suicide Squad,* the best big movie of the summer. Netflix and British first-time feature director Jeymes Samuel decided, to no one's surprise but Elba's, to hold off shooting *The Harder They Fall* until their star had recovered. "Me and Idris have been speaking about this film for 177 years, so I wasn't shooting the movie without him," says Samuel.

and have a rant *and* get kicked out of a pub."

Acting is what he's known for, but (slightly gallingly, if we're being honest) it's probably not even Elba's first love. He had a famed residency in Ibiza under the name DJ Big Driis and has played sets at Glastonbury, Coachella, and his friends' weddings (if you're Prince Harry and Meghan Markle). This past summer, he recorded a remix of Paul McCartney's "Long Tailed Winter Bird," which the former Beatle himself pronounced "indubitably groovy." In June, he launched a podcast with Dhowre called *Coupledom,* on which they grill other notable double acts, such as Kim Kardashian West and Kris Jenner. They want the Obamas for the next season. He collaborated on a shoe collection with his wife and Christian Louboutin, and he has a first-look deal to develop new projects with Apple TV+. Oh, and he has petitioned world leaders about climate change and encouraged them to support rural farmers in countries throughout Africa. He had a meeting in January with French president Emmanuel Macron that he described as "solid."

Even in quarantine, stuck on his own in what must be the worst hotel room he's known in twenty years, Elba has no plans to stop. "I've got all my recording equipment because I always take it with me on the road, so I decided to make a project," he says. "I'm going to document my time here on this wonderful thing called a GoPro and make some music attached to this time. And I'm going to make a weird piece of abstract art. Now, the world may never see it. But there's just no way that I can sit still."

Elba has little doubt where his ambition and work ethic come from. In fact, he can pretty well put a date on it: 1984, when he turned twelve. Until then, he'd had a mostly stress-free, if not idyllic, childhood. His father, Winston, from Sierra Leone, and his Ghanaian mother, Eve, had moved to London in the early seventies. Idris was born soon after and was their only child. They settled in Hackney, a multicultural neighborhood in the east of the city. Winston worked for almost thirty years at a Ford car plant, mainly on the factory floor, before eventually being elected as a shop steward. His mother was a clerical assistant. Elba's friends were white, Black, Turkish; he got along with everyone.

That changed when his parents, looking to move up from an apartment in a tower block to a house, relocated to Canning Town, an area to the far east of the city mostly leveled by bombs in World War II. The new place was only a little more than three miles away but felt to Elba, who was a teenager by then, like a different world. Canning Town was a heartland for the National Front and the British National Party, on the extreme right, even neo-Nazi wing of UK politics. The mid-eighties were also the heyday of English soccer hooligans. One of the most notorious groups was the Inter City Firm from West Ham United, who played just up the road from Canning Town. They would beat you up and then pop a business card in your pocket: "Congratulations. You have just met the I. C. F." "If you were Black or Indian, you're getting it," recalls Elba. "You're getting it! Spat at, bottles, you name it."

In his first class on his first day at his new, all-boys school, Elba was greeted by the class joker singing "Feed the world . . ." from "Do They Know It's Christmas?"—a charity single recorded in 1984 by a supergroup of British musicians to support victims of the Ethiopian famine. "This kid was flash. I remember he had a Jheri curl at a time; everyone thought he was funny," says Elba. "And I've walked in and I was a pretty skinny African kid, no Jheri curls, nothing flash about me, not much money. Everyone started laughing at me! And so I'm just like, 'Right, well, fuck you, man!' *Pow!* Hit him in his chest. And he smashed a test tube and tried to go for me."

Boogie, the boy who tried to glass Elba, actually became a close friend—and still is. Neither told the headmaster who started the fight; more than that, they liked the same music and both became DJs. But there's still a competitive spikiness, as was shown when Boogie had a cameo on Elba and Dhowre's podcast this year. "Who's done Glastonbury?" Elba taunted him. Boogie replied, "I don't care if you've done my missus—I'm still the best DJ."

Elba, partly because he wanted new sneakers, partly because he wanted a better life, knew he had to start earning. At fourteen, he took his first job, fitting tires on a Saturday. On a good day, with tips, he could make around forty dollars. The money came in handy after his family moved to East Ham, near the West Ham United soccer stadium, when he was sixteen. He bought a car off the books so that he didn't have to travel to school on the bus, even though the legal age to drive in the UK is seventeen. "I looked way older than I was, so I didn't get into trouble," says Elba. "No one really fucked with me."

In July, the English soccer team's performance at the European championships sent these memories roaring back to life for Elba. He wasn't even born the last time England won a major soccer tournament, but hope arrived in 2021 with an exciting, racially diverse team that, against logical expectation, made it through to the final against Italy. England took an early lead in the match, but Italy prevailed in a penalty shoot-out. Three England players who missed their kicks happened to be young and Black: Marcus Rashford, Jadon Sancho, and Bukayo Saka. What happened next was ugly and embarrassing, as the players endured racist attacks, primarily on social media. The pain of watching it, for Elba, was far worse than defeat. He was devastated. "Devastated for football. Devastated for my country. Devastated. England has this one shining moment where we nearly get there. And the moment we don't get there, it boils down to that. Broke my heart, man. But at the same time, coming from where I come from in Canning Town, that was every day."

Elba feels an affinity with Rashford, Sancho, and Saka. "A moment like that does not define you," he says. "And being called a 'monkey' or a 'coon' does not define who you are. But fuck that, I've had it in many different shapes and forms. When I got the role as Heimdall in the Marvel universe, there was a real outcry from a sect of the fans." Elba first played the watchman of the gods—also known as "Shining God" because of his pearly skin—in 2011's *Thor* and has now reprised the character four times. "From one perspective, hey, there's a logic: He's Norse; he shouldn't be played by a Black man. But from another sect, there was like 'Idris Elba's a cunt, he's disgusting, he's not fucking James Bond, he's never going to be James Bond.' It was hatred."

Elba falls silent. "If you get to a level like mine, I can't sit here and worry about some dickhead who's got a pseudonym writing, 'Idris is Black, he shouldn't play. . .' " he continues. "I don't care; I shouldn't care about that. Plus, I've got a thick skin, man. I'm old and ugly enough to know that they love you, then they hate you, then they love you again."

CANNING TOWN WAS GOOD FOR ONE THING: AT SCHOOL, ELBA'S DRAMA teacher, Susan McPhee, introduced him to acting. He jumped in with gusto to pretend he was in a car that had broken down or to improv being a fried egg. After school, he won a place at the prestigious National Youth Music Theatre, and this led to small parts on TV and then eventually a bigger one, on a British soap opera called *Family Affairs*. From there, he decamped to the U. S., landing at the YMCA near Union Square in New York City. The dream was to emulate his idols, Denzel Washington, Wesley Snipes, Don Cheadle. The rest is legend: working as a bouncer at the comedy club Carolines while selling pot as a side hustle; living out of a Chevy Astro; finally getting the gig as drug kingpin Stringer Bell (when he really wanted to be Avon Barksdale); an accent that was so tight that Americans mistook him for one of their own and some British folks didn't even click that he was one of theirs until around 2010.

For a new generation of young Black British actors, such as *Get Out*'s Daniel Kaluuya, *Snowfall*'s Damson Idris, and *Bridgerton*'s Regé-Jean Page, Elba presumably is their Denzel. Or at the very least, he has shone a light on a path for them to follow. "I don't know," he says. "Denzel and those people were trailblazers in their industry and the first of their kind. If there is a generation that looks at me the way I looked at Denzel and Wesley and those guys when I was coming up, then great. If I'm that for others, then I'm very proud to take that."

Over the summer, Elba notched an odd, semi-meaningful milestone: his one hundredth acting credit (including a few times he played a version of himself). Not that he'd necessarily been keeping track; I was the one who pointed this out. Then the announcement that he would be joining *Sonic the Hedgehog 2* as the voice of Knuckles, the pugnacious, short-beaked echidna, seemed somehow appropriate: He'd never played one of those before. "One hundredth, wow! That's just mind-blowing," he says, possibly humoring me. "But it's not like I can never say no to working, because I've said no plenty of times. But I just never saw not working as an option for me. Never. I just want

Jacket by **Brunello Cucinelli;**
sweater by **Ermenegildo Zegna;**
trousers by **Hermès.**

to work. I love what I do. I love it. Love it. It's a fucking gem of a job."

If he could pick a handful of his one hundred performances to keep for eternity, which would he choose? "Mandela would be in there," Elba replies instantly, referencing his iconic portrayal in Justin Chadwick's *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. "*Beasts of No Nation*, *Sometimes in April*. Stringer Bell. John Luther. Robert DuBois in *The Suicide Squad*. They weren't all necessarily overly successful as films, but for me personally, there are some very big moments, career-wise, that really I just cannot forget."

Elba won a Golden Globe for the second season of BBC's *Luther;* however, to date there have been no Oscar nominations. Perhaps the most glaring omission involved his haunting performance in 2015's *Beasts of No Nation,* the story of a child soldier in an unnamed African country and Elba's charismatic commandant, who takes him under his wing. Director Cary Joji Fukunaga remembers the first day the actor came on set in Ghana. The production team had created a camp in the jungle, and for two weeks before Elba arrived, a pair of military advisors, veterans of conflicts in Sierra Leone and Liberia, gave 150 men and boys a boot camp in guerrilla warfare. The extras were drilled to stand in formation and learned mesmerizing call-and-response chants of the child soldiers. "How the commander look?" their leader would beseech. "Good!" they would scream back in unison.

"You'd listen to these slogans and you couldn't help being moved by the chorus of voices," recalls Fukunaga. "So when Idris showed up, I knew it was going to be impressive. And it was funny to watch him just own it: step in front of these guys, nod his head, and be like, 'Yeah, this is my battalion.' Any other actor would have wilted a little bit. But Idris, anytime someone turns up the pressure, he steps up. Anytime someone raises the bar, he'll jump higher. He owned the role so much that for our extras that were his battalion of soldiers, he wasn't just an actor; he was their leader."

Beasts of No Nation, the first Netflix movie to have a cinematic release—a controversial land grab that led to a boycott of the film by four of the major U.S. theater chains—received no Academy Award nominations. For what it's worth, Elba believes that if it had come out in 2021, the response would be markedly changed. "The radar is different now," he says. "To ignore a movie like that at this juncture, you could quite easily be called racist. The temperature of sensitivity is up. People just saw it at the time and were like, 'Dark movie. Great.' But now it would be a statement: 'Oh, we've got to put a nod to that.' And that's partly a bit weird. Don't give out awards just because it's cool or PC to do it. Give it out on its merit. Don't just give me an award because you feel guilty."

Through much of his career, Elba has operated on a ratio of two for them, one for me. "That two for them is commercial, big—that's *them,*" he explains. "The one for *you,* something you've nurtured, something you believe in, smaller, you're not getting paid for it."

But that's not to say money jobs always mean selling your soul: For Elba, one such project was *The Suicide Squad,* the sequel to 2016's no-definite-article *Suicide Squad*. Director James Gunn (*Guardians of the Galaxy*) was brought in to offer a new spin on the DC Comics supervillains who form a secret government task force to save the world. Gunn signed up Elba, and together, the actor says, they "handpicked" the role of Bloodsport, an overlooked occasional in the DC universe whose main claim to fame is that he once took down Superman with a kryptonite bullet. At no point, Elba is adamant, was there any discussion of him taking the part of Deadshot, played by Will Smith in the original movie, a rumor that swirled around the fan forums.

"In fact, when I signed on, there was a possibility that Will was going to be in it also," says Elba. "But he publicly then said he wasn't going to do that. And it's exciting because I've always admired Will; he's an incredible talent. I envision a world where Deadshot and Bloodsport live in a film. It would be great to play against someone that has such a legacy and such range. And there are similarities between the two characters, actually, that would be quite funny to explore."

Margot Robbie, who plays the riotous Harley Quinn in both movies, says

Jacket, sweater, and trousers by **Dolce & Gabbana;** boots by **Grenson.**

IDRIS

Coat by **Givenchy;** polo by **Giorgio Armani;** trousers by **Hermès;** sneakers by **Christian Louboutin.**

"I'm old *and* ugly enough to know *that* they love

Elba brought a special talent to a deceptively difficult role. "Begrudgingly, Bloodsport is the leader of the Suicide Squad in this film," she says. "And sometimes the leader of the gang has to give the expositional dialogue or he has to bring the stakes within five minutes of the movie starting. And I just feel like [Elba is] so good at that. He doesn't seem silly when he does it. I'd look at the lines he had to deliver and I was like, 'Fuck! He's really good at this!' "

Next up is *The Harder They Fall,* the stylized, hyperviolent revisionist western that Elba was preparing to film when he came down with Covid. The delay was in fact almost six months, and when the shoot resumed, the protocol was to wear a mask and goggles when not on camera, which was apparently neither shits nor giggles in the New Mexico desert in August. The opening shot is a graphic of the words "While the events of this story are fictional. . . These. People. Existed." Despite Hollywood's long and unsavory history of whitewashing the Old West, historians now believe that one in four cowboys was Black. Jeymes Samuel, who records music as the Bullitts when he's not directing, has crafted a joyous, highly entertaining film that jams together, Avengers-style, some of the most notorious characters of the late nineteenth century, including sharpshooter Cherokee Bill (Stanfield), Stagecoach Mary (*Atlanta*'s Zazie Beetz), and rival gang leaders Nat Love (Majors) and Rufus Buck (Elba).

Elba's Buck doesn't say much. There are fireworks everywhere around him: Stanfield drawls the best lines, and Beetz and Regina King (as "Treacherous" Trudy Smith) go toe-to-toe and blade-to-blade in a spectacular fight scene. Elba, meanwhile, remains impassive, almost expressionless, and yet it is his character who stays with you when the dust settles. "It's such a measured performance that in the end, you're crying," says Samuel. "He says so much with his eyes, and when he chooses to speak, it just has the weight of Hades. It was an amazing thing to experience. Idris would be at my house practically every evening as Idris Elba. But in the day, I would not recognize that guy. His whole demeanor, everything about him, is different. That's probably why he'll do music in the evenings: to wind down. To cleanse the darkness."

TWO WEEKS AFTER OUR ZOOM, ELBA HAS ESCAPED QUARANTINE AND is at large. We meet in central London at the location for the Esquire photo shoot: a dilapidated, abandoned hotel that is currently on the market for $32 million (a sum for which you might expect the ceilings not to be held up by scaffolding and the toilet not to look like the one from *Trainspotting*). Maybe because he has had enough of the gloomy rooms, maybe because the place looks structurally hazardous, maybe because he wants a drink after a long day, Elba suggests we talk in a pub around the corner. He walks with the stiff, clunky gait of a boxer, as if his body aches in ways more profound than mortals could ever know, and he slumps down at an outside table behind a Jack and Coke. I have a goldfish bowl of gin and tonic, and I'd venture that by the time we're done, we'll both be pleasantly sozzled. Elba puts away his cell phone when he sits down and doesn't look at it again. I'm reminded of something Samuel told me about him: "When he's with you, he's with you and only you."

How loopy and deranged was his quarantine GoPro film in the end? Elba smizes his famous smize. "I haven't gone through the footage, because I've come out and just plowed back into life," he replies. An addition to the family has hampered his artistic ambitions: "I came out to find that my wife had bought us a puppy. A sheepadoodle: part sheepdog, part poodle. They got to work on the name. I don't like to say what kind of dog I've got. Doesn't sound cool.

"So my life has been *wooohh!* My seven-year-old son and my sheepadoodle. My son named her Lola. Solid name." A cocked eyebrow: "I don't know where he got that name from. It's a bit weird."

Reentry has been particularly tough this time for Elba. He often took his son, whom he co-parents with his former partner, makeup artist Naiyana Garth (they've both agreed Elba should not mention his name in the press), onto sets with him, but Covid-19 put a stop to that. That's meant long absences as Elba has been on shoots in first New Mexico, then Australia on a new George Miller film, and finally South Africa for the Baltasar Kormákur project. "As a parent, it's hard to make sure that you still have the same connection with your kids," he says. "I've never had a problem with that. But this time has been difficult, because I've been away for almost a couple years on and off. My boy, he's not thrilled with me going away so much. So that's an adjustment."

Elba has a daughter, Isan, from his first marriage, to Kim Norgaard, also a makeup artist. Isan is nineteen and a film student at NYU. During lockdown, they struck up a partnership to make TV shows together, and they've already sold a project. "She's smart, quite tuned in, Generation Z," says Elba. "And it's fun for me because there's life lessons that come out of it. You're with your daughter, and she doesn't quite understand this or that. Well, it is a great opportunity for Dad to impart some wisdom." A pause, a frown: "Or as she likes to say, 'dadsplaining.' " (The world may bow down to Elba, but his kids and friends keep him honest. "He's kind of like a goofy dad," chides Robbie affectionately. "He'll say something really lame and you're just like, 'Oh, shut up!' ")

Because of the recent frenzied period, Elba has made a radical and, for him, unprecedented decision. "I'm going to sit still for a little while," he says, centrifuging the ice around his tumbler. "I'm not going to travel anywhere for months and months on end. That's a bit more of an adjustment, because I've not done that ever."

Elba's definition of sitting still is somewhat different from the average person's, I'm going to assume. For one thing, he is about to start work on a feature film of the TV series *Luther.* The role is a significant, possibly even defining one for Elba. He signed on for the show in the late 2000s, just as he was feeling that his career was stagnating. Following *The Wire,* there had been consistent work, but Elba was unsure where his future lay. *Luther,* set in the streets of east London he knew so well, provided a path. John Luther, a tired-looking police detective, was gripped by a midlife crisis; so was Elba. Perhaps they could work through it together, he thought. The show debuted in 2010 and ran for five successful seasons until bowing out, on a cliffhanger, in 2019.

"I say this in jest, but this is my answer to Bond," says Elba. "[Luther] is my big character that lives in the same space as the Bournes, as the Bonds in the world. Not in terms of spy works or spying, but this is a character that fights evil and then will stop at nothing to do it. And we created him from scratch. Me and [showrunner] Neil Cross really plowed our hearts into making John Luther. And I've never been more thankful for a character that keeps going. I love him. And it's a hard character to play. It's very absorbing, but I've liked bringing him to life every time. I've loved it."

It's difficult to know how seriously to take what sounds very much like Elba ruling himself out of playing Bond. Perhaps he's just fed up that Bond speculation has at times overshadowed an otherwise stellar, versatile career. Or he has decided that, pushing fifty, he should pass on the burden to a member of a new generation, such as thirty-one-year-old Regé-Jean Page, the current front-runner. Most likely Elba just wants to stop having a conversation that, as is evident from the one moment in our interview when there's a chill in the room (or rather, the Zoom), he really dislikes.

I ask Fukunaga, who directed the most recent 007 installment, *No Time to Die,* how he thinks Elba would get on. "As Bond?" Fukunaga replies. "It'd be a cakewalk. He could easily do it. There's an ease (continued on page 116)

you, then they *hate* you, then they *love* you again."

WHICH watc

PART 1

IN WITH THE NEW

For most, life's big watch adventure begins with a new one from a trustworthy source: the makers themselves. At a boutique or a multibrand store, not only are you assured of first-class know-how, but you'll also benefit from the top-level servicing needed to keep your timepiece ticking for decades. Where to start? Here are ten of the best new watches of the year.

SLIM D'HERMÈS SQUELETTE LUNE

Elevating design and finishing to the *n*th degree, Hermès fuses imagination with modern fashionability. Case in point: the Slim d'Hermès Squelette Lune, a blend of high-tech materials and age-old watchmaking skills. *$20,550*

THE KICKER: The visible skeleton—the inner workings of the watch—is a 24/7 celebration of the watchmaker's art. This treatment can be found all over the shop, and not just at high-end prices.

h NOW 2021

The Esquire guide to owning and collecting (and enjoying!) timepieces, from vintage to pre-owned to ten of the best new watches of the year

BY NICK SULLIVAN

ROLEX OYSTER DAY-DATE 36

If you're willing to shell out for a watch, you might think: *Go big.* Yet the trend in timepieces now is to slim down. One example: the Rolex Oyster Day-Date 36, which emerged this year in a combination of rose gold and a white lacquer dial in its original 36mm size. The first watch to spell out the day in full, it recalls a time when phones weren't glued to people's palms. *$35,850*

THE KICKER: Fun fact—watches with Roman numerals tend to show 4:00 as IIII instead of IV. It's for visual balance, see?

VACHERON CONSTANTIN OVERSEAS DUAL TIME EVEREST

When you're the oldest continuously operating watchmaker in existence, you could rest on your foundation of dressy timepieces. But Vacheron Constantin is still innovating with its Overseas collection, which combines superlative finishing with modern design. Our favorite this year is the rugged yet elegant dual-time version. *$31,300*

THE KICKER: The variation in finishes between polished steel and micro-blasted titanium gives great depth.

MONTBLANC 1858 GEOSPHERE ULTRABLACK

The Montblanc Geosphere UltraBlack can tell you the time practically anywhere in the world. Inside its chunky 42mm case are two 24-hour subdials that rotate in opposite directions in real time to reveal the hour in different parts of the globe. *$6,900*

THE KICKER: The tiny red dots in each hemisphere mark the Seven Summits, the highest peaks on all seven continents.

BELL & ROSS BR V3-94 A521

You might know Bell & Ross as the brand with bulky square watches that are reminiscent of cockpit instruments. But this new chronograph, part of the Alpine F1 collection, is all about racing and is offered in a round shape, too. There is a square version made with materials evoking an F1 race car. Still, our money is on the round one—you know, just for a change. *$4,700*

THE KICKER: The mid-blue accents on the chapter ring and hands offer a refreshing edge while subtly calling out the Alpine F1 team's color palette.

OMEGA SEAMASTER DIVER 300M BLACK BLACK

The longest-running watch collab in movie history is between James Bond and the Seamaster. Since 1995, the Seamaster has been his weapon of choice in the timekeeping department, spawning a series of highly collectible 007 special editions. This year, however, you can tap into a darkly glamorous Diver that is not in Bond's inventory. The 300M Black Black is made largely in ceramic, including the case, the bezel, the dial, and even the buckle on the, yes, black rubber strap. It's not just black; it's really, really emphatically black. *$8,650*

THE KICKER: By day, it's the picture of stealth. By night, the thing lights up like a Christmas tree, with blue emission Super-LumiNova for the hour markers and hour and second hands, plus green for the minute hand.

CLOCHE DE CARTIER IN GOLD

When you think Cartier, you may think stylishly square, as in the illustrious Santos (first available in 1911) or the Tank (from 1917). But it's been known to play with much more esoteric shapes, too, such as the melty, Dalíesque Cartier Crash (from 1967). These curiosities have become cult classics over the years, and the Cloche de Cartier follows that tradition, proving that once you can think outside the box, literally anything is possible. *$27,500*

THE KICKER: The bell shape is a unique and fashionable way to flout convention without being over-the-top.

COURTESY BRANDS (PAGES 82–83, THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE)

TUDOR BLACK BAY FIFTY-EIGHT 925

The Black Bay 58 has quickly established itself as a pillar of the Tudor range, but this year, the brand produced one of the most compelling versions of it yet . . . in sterling silver, a metal that's extremely rare in modern watchmaking. With its smoky taupe dial and anodized aluminum bezel, the watch's otherworldly looks created the most intense chatter and social posts over the spring and summer. Love divers but want to luxe it up beyond steel and titanium? This is the watch for you. *$4,300*

THE KICKER: How many silver watches do you have?

BREITLING TOP TIME SHELBY COBRA

The Top Time is a much-loved watch from the golden age of the chronograph, the mid-1960s. In those years, a new breed of watches aimed at younger wearers simplified the look of chronographs, transforming them from scientific instruments into fun yet functional tools. The name Top Time was chosen to appeal to the youngsters, too. It worked. In 2020, Breitling brought back the Top Time, and this year it gives us a triple homage to three American sports cars: the Cobra, the Mustang, and the Corvette. We dig the Shelby Cobra the most, a 40mm blue reverse Panda with the Cobra logo at 6:00. *$5,500*

THE KICKER: The case shape is pretty much identical to that of the sought-after original.

AUDEMARS PIGUET ROYAL OAK OFFSHORE

Back in 1993, the Audemars Piguet Royal Oak Offshore was the first supersized luxury watch at 42mm, bigger than most at the time. It was quickly nicknamed the Beast, and in the 1990s it grew on a generation of men—like Arnold Schwarzenegger—who liked everything supersized. It continues to be the ticker of choice for ballers today. With 42mm and 44mm already part of the line, the newest iteration splits the difference at 43mm. *$38,200*

THE KICKER: It's hard to think of a more recognizable—or symbolic—shape in watchmaking, which makes the Offshore a bold statement.

DOs and DON'Ts

1

Veteran travelers may tell you to set the time to your destination when you depart to mitigate jet lag. But don't do it after the plane has taken off. The pressurized cabin can cause air to rush into your watch, bringing the threat of moisture.

2

When fastening your watch, get into the habit of doing so over soft furniture or a carpeted floor. Sapphire crystals really do not agree with marble floors.

3

Protect your timepiece from extremes of heat and cold. Fluctuations can cause the gaskets to harden and become ineffective barriers against moisture.

4

Don't leave your watch on objects that create magnetic fields, like tablets, phones, and speakers. Magnets can interrupt the oscillations of the regulating balance wheel and affect the accuracy of your watch.

PART 2

ORDER IT RARE

Vintage watches are more than very old pieces with interesting design details. The best come with a story of how they were lost and how they were found. They have a soul. Whether you do your own sleuthing to find one or work with an expert dealer, there's nothing like adding your own history to a watch that already has one.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Patek Philippe 3739 Jumbo Golden Ellipse ($23,250); Vacheron Constantin Ref. 4752 ($8,000–$12,000); Audemars Piguet Ultra Slim Disco Volante ($8,000–$10,000); Cartier Baignoire ($23,500); Patek Philippe White Gold Gondolo ($20,000); Rolex King Midas Hobnail Burlwood ($4,000–$7,000). All from the selection at analogshift.com.

Slim Pickings

When it comes to vintage, smaller is the future

When you deliberately slide a small watch onto your wrist, there's some reverse psychology going on there. Take the Cartier Tank, for instance. Titchy in stature, it's a total eye magnet to other watch buffs, so small you cannot miss it. What it telegraphs is that you know your onions when it comes to watches and, crucially, that you like to swim against the tide of more conventional men.

As the vintage market maintains its white-hot obsession with certain chunky Rolexes and sporty Pateks, James Lamdin, founder of vintage-watch dealer Analog/Shift (now part of Watches of Switzerland), has a hunch that the new, niche direction in vintage-watch collecting will be defined by the slim, elegant, and very often golden watches that were once considered the epitome of quiet cool.

In that vein, above are Lamdin's six favorites from Analog/Shift's current wares.

FORENSICS

The Fifth Beatle and His Taste for Fine Dress Watches

Poring over old Brian Epstein photos unearths some rather collectible—and fancy—watches

An occupational hazard, if you like men of style and their watches, is a regular deep dive into Google Images. By zooming in on ancient and grainy 35mm paparazzi shots, you get to forensically examine the wrists of the great and the cool to try to identify the unknown timepiece they might be wearing. Case in point: Beatles manager Brian Epstein, seen here arriving in Germany for a press junket with John Lennon on September 5, 1966. His outfit is fairly nondescript, but his watch—four black subdials on a white background—is pretty unmistakable. To this somewhat educated eye, it looks for all the world like a Universal Geneve "Eric Clapton," named after its most famous owner.

If you spend enough time gawping at pictures of him online, it's apparent that Epstein had a developing thing for fancy wristwatches during the Beatles years, until his untimely death in August 1967. Clearly there was money coming in. There's a square Piaget with a solid-gold bracelet—possibly two, one with a tiger's-eye dial—and a Cartier Baignoire (bought in 1966, per auction notes when it sold for more than $40,000 at Sotheby's in 2020). According to the family, Epstein bought one for himself; one for his mother, Queenie; and one for George Harrison—around the same time. All of these watches were on the slim, posh, and dressy end. The Universal is an anomaly, something altogether more casual. But 1966 was a pivotal year for the Beatles, a year of unfortunate events that ended their touring for good. The band ditched the cute suits and joined the psychedelic generation, drugs and all. The rest was musical history.

Though some of the Beatles later became synonymous with a couple of iconic and very expensive watches, that was well after the band split. While together, they were seen in numerous photo ops wearing what appeared to be some of Epstein's own watches. Ringo with one Piaget and Paul with another for the PR launch of *Sgt. Pepper's;* George with his Baignoire. It seems nobody got their hands on Epstein's Universal, except maybe Eric Clapton. One tantalizing reader comment below a 2017 Hodinkee article about Clapton's famous watch proposes that it was Epstein himself who gave Clapton his; reportedly the musician still owns it. Further tantalizing is the suggestion, in the same comment, that Epstein gave four more UG's to the Beatles all at once. If that's true, one can only wonder what they'd be worth now. Even without the lofty provenance, a minty Eric Clapton regularly makes in excess of $20K. With it, well, just think of a number.

COURTESY ANALOG/SHIFT (WATCHES). GETTY IMAGES (EPSTEIN).

PART 3

NEW TO YOU

Eager for something new without necessarily paying full price? Go pre-owned. As with a sports car, sometimes it's more worthwhile to have someone else take the initial hit on depreciation. Similarly, if you buy from a seller with a bona fide reputation, they can make repairs to ensure your nearly new watch is as close to factory perfect as possible.

Pre-owned Made Easy

If you'd rather not worry about whether a used timepiece is in working order—or worse, stolen—head to Crown & Caliber

Building (or starting) a watch collection when you don't have bottomless pockets means looking for canny ways to score that object of desire at a discount. Fortunately, there's a thing called the Internet. Unfortunately, here be monsters, ready to separate you from your cash for almost-new watches of doubtful provenance. It therefore pays to go to sources with a proven track record. When Hamilton Powell set up Crown & Caliber in 2013, his goal was to make the whole undertaking of finding and buying pre-owned watches a safer one. Based out of Atlanta, the business was founded on a rigorous process of authentication, appraisal, and, if necessary, mending by a team of fully trained watchmakers.

There's no hiding from the fact that the pre-owned-watch market is of growing significance. (This year, Crown & Caliber was bought by New York-based watch hub Hodinkee.) But it can be a scary place for even seasoned collectors. Consignment sales and eBay are not for the faint-hearted. "The pre-owned-watch-buying experience is still a little bit like the Wild West," says Hodinkee CEO Toby Bateman. "There are dozens of questions or challenges that men and women face when trying to buy a pre-owned watch online. In researching the market in the U. S. A. specifically, and assessing all of the sellers of pre-owned watches, we felt Crown & Caliber was best in class. And that comes from the fact that they own everything they sell."

But it's the presale stages that are most critical for Bateman. "We actually send packaging out to those people that accept a quote from us," he explains. "When it comes in, the watch is taken out of the box beneath a video camera. This may sound like a minor detail, but for me, it's really vital. It's about the chain, from start to finish, how authentic and how controlled everything is in this space."

Once a delivered watch is removed from its box, it goes to a trained authentication team. Watchmakers will then test it for timekeeping and water resistance, take the back off to look at the movement, and check the serial numbers against stolen-watch registers. Then every single watch is cleaned and polished regardless of whether it needs repair. If it requires full service, that's what it gets.

Just how much you will save by buying a pre-owned watch at Crown & Caliber largely depends on the one you're after. Prices are generally fixed to be fair, to account for prevailing market prices, and to cover the cost of all that service. Moreover, with a trade-in service, you can save more on the watch you buy. In some extremely rare cases, C&C will have very in-demand watches actually listed above the manufacturer's price. But for the overwhelming majority, buying nearly new from a respectable and established hub will help them save not only money but their sanity as well.

A taste of Cartier, Audemars Piguet, and Bell & Ross watches from the large range at Crown & Caliber.

COURTESY LAURENCE & CO. (WATCH SHOP). COURTESY BRANDS (REMAINING).

DOS and DON'TS

5

Some swear by resting a watch on its crown to reduce scratches on the other side of the case. But if you do this, there's a chance that the watch will roll over; always rest a watch on its back or side if possible.

6

Every now and then, gift a watch to a friend, even an inexpensive one. Friends never forget a watch they were given. Unless it's a really, really cheap one.

7

While traveling, if you're not wearing your watch, store it in a soft suede pouch, a dedicated travel case, or even a sock. And never leave watches in checked baggage.

8

If you're traveling, try to stick to one watch. You'll have less to keep track of in your bags or hotel safe. Forgetting a watch is worse than forgetting your keys.

9

If you have to remove the watch—say, for an X-ray scanner—put it in a jacket pocket with nothing else in it. Keys and coins can do a real number on it.

HAVE SPERM, WILL TRAVEL

Amidst a historic shortage at sperm banks nationwide, a new means of donation is on the rise: Facebook groups. Elaine Byrd got involved in the community first as a moderator, then as a recipient. That's how she met Ari Nagel, aka the Sperminator, a superdonor with nearly a hundred biological children and counting. But could he possibly live up to his own hype?

By RACHEL MONROE

Photographs by
ANDREW HETHERINGTON

Ari Nagel has biologically fathered nearly one hundred children around the world. He offers his services free of charge.

ELAINE BYRD WANTED

a second child. The longing began after a hectic period in 2015, when she'd cared for three children under the age of two: her daughter, Ember, and a relative's infant twins. Fortunately,

Elaine, a kindergarten teacher in the suburbs of Memphis, liked babies. Years earlier, she'd fostered several children. At least with infants, there were no midnight calls from the police, no fights in the street. Instead, there were court dates, doctor appointments, paperwork. Elaine needed more help than Ember's father was willing to give, and after they'd had the twins for a couple months, she left him. Caring for the children was easier on her own, which didn't mean it was easy. One day she drove by a church whose lawn was studded with crosses representing the souls of aborted fetuses. She called the pastor. "In my house there are a couple of babies that could've been aborted," she told him. "Now they're here, and I have to go to work." The next morning at 6:30 sharp, a lady from the church showed up to watch them, and she came back every day after that.

After the twins were returned to their mother's care, Elaine was eager to get pregnant again. By now she knew she didn't need a man to raise a child, but she did need one to help her start the process. She spent a year and a half trying to meet someone the old-fashioned way but didn't have much luck. She asked Ember's father if he'd drop off some sperm at a nearby fertility clinic, but he asked too many questions about custody and child support. There were sperm banks, of course, but to Elaine they seemed so impersonal, not to mention expensive. As her fortieth birthday approached, she worried that her time was running out. Then she remembered this cute girl she knew from the beauty-pageant scene, where Ember had become a top national competitor. Elaine was friendly enough with the girl's mothers, so one day she asked, "How did your baby get here?" She glanced from one woman to the other. "Because I think you had to have some kind of help."

"And she just took me under her wing and told me everything," Elaine said. "All the real, raw details."

Like mattresses and houseplants, sperm donation has been disrupted by the Internet. The market demanded it: Supply at sperm banks is at a historic low, in part because average sperm counts have steadily declined for more than four decades—probably due to environmental factors—and now many men no longer meet the banks' strict standards. And nonwhite donors have always been underrepresented.

As an alternative, many people are turning to social media for direct-to-consumer sperm via Facebook groups like USA Sperm Donation, Real Sperm Donors, and Miracle Baby. Their members include potential donors as well as people who want to get pregnant but don't have ready access to viable sperm: infertile couples, queer couples, trans men, single mothers by choice. In the groups, they seek donations from people like Kristian (six-foot-one, slender, hazel eyes, excellent sperm count, recent STD tests) and Alex (six-foot-three, perfect SAT scores, athletic). Compared with sperm banks, which keep donors anonymous, the men on Facebook are much more open: A donor might show a potential recipient pictures of other children he's conceived, chat with her via DM to see if they vibe, and invite her to join a private Facebook group for the parents of the children he's fathered. And unlike sperm banks, where a single specimen can run upward of $1,000, the Facebook donors generally provide their sperm for free, other than reimbursement for travel and other expenses.

The idea of a known donor appealed to Elaine. Ember knew her father, even though she didn't live with him; Elaine wanted her future children to have that opportunity, too. Ideally, she decided, she wanted a donor who would remain in friendly, loose contact with his offspring. By 2018, Elaine was spending hours each day in the Facebook groups, considering potential donors. She learned the subculture's argot and saw hints of the complications that the pageant mom had warned her about. AI meant artificial insemination, typically performed using a soft cup, a vessel that looked like a diaphragm, into which the donor ejaculated. NI stood for natural insemination—i.e., sex, which some donors insisted was the more effective method, since some sperm die when exposed to air. Other donors shipped sperm, but that got expensive: dry ice, overnight delivery. One guy in Atlanta was known as the Uber Donor: He'd jerk off into a cup and send the sample via car service.

Though the groups had tens of thousands of members between them, the donor pool wasn't as big as it initially seemed. Three quarters of Sperm Donation USA's members were people seeking donors, just like Elaine. She discovered that finding the right candidate among the limited options was tricky. There were donors who struck her as genuine: They talked about how they'd joined the groups after watching their friends or sisters struggle to conceive. But some had murkier motivations. From other women, Elaine heard stories of guys who'd ghosted, or turned creepy, or refused to take an STD test. Some would pretend to be okay with AI but, at the last minute, insist on NI.

And then there was this one white man whose name kept popping up. Ari Nagel, forty-six, was tall, with blue eyes, a wide smile, and soft, graying curls. Over the past decade, he'd had more than fifty donor children and was something of a celebrity in the world of sperm donation. He didn't offer his services in the groups because he didn't have to; women sought him out. Dozens of mothers vouched for him online. Elaine, who is Black, appreciated that he was a math teacher and didn't mind that he was white—so was Ember's dad. She looked Ari up on Instagram, where his handle was CuteProfessor, and on Facebook, where it was NicePerson. Almost all the photos featured his donor children—so many beaming, beautiful babies.

In December 2018, Elaine messaged Ari on Facebook. When he didn't reply, she reached out again. "Hey, I've been trying to get up with you for a minute," she wrote. She told him that she had some questions for him.

"Sure," he replied. "U can ask anything."

ARI NAGEL GREW UP IN MONSEY, New York, home of one of the largest Orthodox Jewish communities in the United States. He was the fifth of seven children, which wasn't unusual in Monsey. Everywhere around him he saw big, tight-knit families. At the yeshiva he attended as a boy, everyone in the class looked exactly like him: white Ashkenazi Ortho-

dox boys. Everyone around him seemed confident that they knew how a family was supposed to look and behave.

When he was in college, at St. John's in Queens, New York, Ari received a hefty settlement from a motorcycle accident, which he used to travel to dozens of countries across Europe, Asia, and the Middle East. Seeing so much of the world made it hard to stay religious.

He returned to the city, where, by day, he taught math and computer skills at a City University of New York campus; by night, he went clubbing or rode his motorcycle around the city. His first child, born in 2003, was unplanned: a one-night stand that turned into a fling that led to a pregnancy. Ari married the mother, a woman from the Caribbean, as a kind of courtesy, he said. They kept separate apartments, and every week or so Ari would visit his son, but it was hardly a traditional marriage, and certainly not monogamous on his part.

When his son was a toddler, Ari saw an ad on Craigslist from a lesbian couple seeking a sperm donor. He thought, *Why not?* Maybe he could conceive a daughter, too. A few weeks later, a single woman he knew needed a donor, and he agreed to help out. He created a profile on the Known Donor Registry, an online list of donors that predates many of the Facebook groups, and over the next few years, he provided sperm to a couple women each year.

Emerson Lee Nagel Byrd, born on August 8, 2021.

He donated in New Jersey, Connecticut, even once in Illinois. When his friends asked why, his answer was simple: He liked to "help women," and they "kept asking." He'd do NI, depending on the vibe, but most of his donations were via AI—simpler, quicker, safer. His wife was like, *Why are you helping all these lesbians and not me?* So they conceived two more children, both daughters. By 2016, he had fathered twenty-two children. To keep them straight, he created a spreadsheet listing everyone's name and birthday.

That year, the *New York Post* interviewed him for an article. He thought it was going to be a short piece, but they put him on the front page with an enormous headline—GREAT BALLS OF SIRE!—and gave him a nickname that's stuck: the Sperminator.

The article was voyeuristic, unflattering. It made a big point of the fact that some of Ari's donations had happened in public restrooms, and some of the moms came off as shallow and trashy. The Internet exploded with fascination and scorn. His parents were horrified. They had adopted a don't-ask-don't-tell policy toward his procreative activities; now their whole community knew. His wife was shocked. She'd known he had fathered children with other women but didn't know how many. Ari was largely unruffled. In the ensuing weeks, he received hundreds of messages via Facebook. There were women all over the world, it turned out, who wanted his help conceiving. The Sperminator was only just getting started.

IN THE SPERM DONATION USA group, Elaine learned things about sperm that amazed her. For an abundant, renewable resource, it was surprisingly tricky to obtain. She learned that she was lucky to be seeking a donor in the U. S. In many countries—including Germany and France—clinics wouldn't inseminate single mothers or lesbians; in Japan, only married heterosexual couples could legally use donor sperm. The sperm crisis in the United Kingdom was so extreme that some experts advocated harvesting samples from the recently dead.

Elaine and Ari chatted sporadically throughout 2019. She learned that he'd been married three times, all of them "marriages of convenience," as he put it: first to the woman from the Caribbean; then to a religious woman who felt it was important for her child to be born in wedlock; then to a woman overseas, to comply with local laws regarding artificial insemination. By the end of the year, Elaine had decided she was ready to conceive a donor child. She arranged for Ari to visit her in Tennessee in February 2020. He said he'd give her the donation after visiting newborn twins he'd helped conceive in Louisville, then stay with another of his donor children's mothers in Nashville.

Elaine dropped Ember off with her mother and headed to the hotel where they planned to meet. As she waited for Ari to show up, she was queasy with nerves. She'd readied the insemination kit that her pageant friend had suggested she order: the soft cup, the syringe, all of it plastic-smelling and impersonal.

When Ari arrived, he was so casual, acting as if they'd known each other for years. They sat on the couch and chatted. Then he went into the bathroom and, a few minutes later, came out with the cup. Elaine went into the bedroom and used the syringe to insert the sample. She raised her legs because everyone in the groups said that would help speed the sperm along. Ari seemed much less weirded out than she was; he made the strange situation seem normal. She finally started to relax. After they talked for a while, with her legs sticking up in the air, Ari said he was too tired to visit the other mother. Maybe he'd just spend the night here, get some of that good hotel breakfast in the morning. He took off his shoes and lay down in the bed next to Elaine. "My whole mind was circling, like, *What is he doing?*" she told me. "He could have slept on the pull-out couch." In the morning, they had sex. She wanted to, less out of physical desire than because she thought it might improve her chances of getting pregnant.

She hoped to have good news by March, but instead she was admitted to the hospital with what the doctor said was pneumonia—though in retrospect she thinks it was Covid. In April and May, she tried to schedule more visits with Ari, but she said he was upset that her illness had altered her cycle. He told her, she said, that it had been "a waste of time."

As the rest of the world shut down, Ari seemed to speed up. Now that he was teaching remotely, he was free to help women most anytime; by the end of the year, he had twenty-one more children, with thirty more on the way in 2021. Though he was a prolific texter, Elaine struggled to make con-

Elaine Byrd, on the day after she gave birth to Emerson.

crete plans with him. He was always jetting off to freeze embryos in Argentina or to visit an IVF clinic in Russia or to attend a birthday party in Orlando. It felt to her like having another flaky boyfriend. Still, she appreciated how well he understood the complexities of conception. He told her which apps to download, helped her keep track of her cycle. Sometimes it seemed as if he had a better sense of when she'd ovulate than she did.

Attempting to get pregnant as a single woman during a pandemic was isolating, but the Facebook communities helped. Elaine tried to verify the information she came across online by reading peer-reviewed studies on JSTOR. Other women began to DM her, seeking advice. Soon she became a moderator for Sperm Donation USA, the most popular donation group on Facebook (and not to be confused with the unaffiliated but near-identically named USA Sperm Donation). Coaching women through the process took up hours of her day. Most of the other moderators were donors, though none of them as prolific as Ari. In public postings, they talked about wanting to help women. In private messages, however, they often slipped into a macho posturing that made Elaine roll her eyes: trying to impress one another with the volume of their donations, telling stories about the "hot girls" they were "helping." "It's a lot of penis wars," Elaine told me. She could tell that some of the men were envious of Ari's fame—and his productivity. Although Ari co-moderated a couple Facebook groups, he was too busy donating to post very often. Once, another moderator sent her a dick pic with a message: "Hey Elaine, I'm bigger than Ari, right?"

The groups got hectic in the summer, when the pandemic exacerbated the sperm-bank shortage and more people turned to Facebook. Some of the moderators couldn't handle the growing attention. The USA Sperm Donation crew had once been friendly with the Sperm Donation USA crew; now they were engaged in a bitter feud, with donors from one group trying to take down the most popular posters from the other. A guy uploaded a video of another donor having sex. One donor called another man's wife and informed her that he'd been performing NI. The moderators of the warring factions attempted to recruit new men from all corners of the Internet, each striving to have the most members. One of the moderators, a veteran from New Jersey, started several new groups: Proven Sperm Donors, Natural Sperm Donors, LGBTQ Sperm Donation. The whole thing struck Elaine as absurd. Wasn't it better to have a small number of reliable donors than a huge number of unvetted strangers? Her primary role as a moderator was to keep the creeps out, a task that got trickier as hundreds of men clamored to join the groups every day. She looked at each one's profile, trying to suss him out. Had he fathered other children? Was there any evidence that he was into creepy sexual stuff? Was he in it for the right reasons?

THE FIRST TIME I TALKED to Ari, via Facebook, he offered to inseminate me—jokingly, I think. We met in person one night this past summer, when he texted me at midnight, from LaGuardia Airport in Queens. He'd been helping a woman in Dallas and now was heading straight from the airport to midtown, where a woman named Essence was ovulating. He was sure it wouldn't be a problem if I tagged along. She needed to hit her peak fertility window, so she wasn't about to be picky.

Ari emerged from his black Chevy SUV wearing a lilac polo shirt and white Crocs. I asked him whom we were visiting. "I may have met her before, or this may be the first time," he said. He had a strong New York accent and looked a little rumpled with fatigue. He pulled up the woman's Facebook profile and squinted at her picture: a round-faced Black woman with braids coiled on the top of her head.

On the third floor of her building, a woman with long spirals of mermaidy hair—Leandra, Essence's wife—let us into an apartment so tiny there wasn't room for a chair. The women had been about to go to bed when Ari replied to Essence's message. Now the air was charged with a purposeful feeling.

"I can't believe it. You're here. You came!" Leandra squealed.

"Well, not yet," Ari said. "This is the foreplay!" As soon as we entered the room, he seemed to become full of antic energy and unable to keep from rattling off dirty jokes.

Essence laughed. "You know who you remind me of? Don't take this offensive," she said. "Borat."

"Or Mr. Bean," Leandra said.

For a moment, Ari seemed wounded, but he quickly recovered and asked for the WiFi password. "I don't want my porn buffering," he said. "I'm gonna Google 'Black lesbians!' " He disappeared into the bathroom.

Essence told me that she'd found Ari by searching Facebook for free sperm donors. "Some female mentioned him, and I was like, *Is this real?* I did my research, I saw him on YouTube, and I saw him on *Maury* and I saw him on *Dr. Oz*." Ari had been her top choice, but he was so busy. In the meantime, she'd arranged to meet up with other donors, but they'd ghosted. Or they were furtive and silent. Or they asked for a tip. She was trying to make a baby, a joyous thing, but these men made her feel as if she were doing something sleazy. Ari, though, was so friendly, happy to stand around chatting. "He helps women of different races have kids, and I think that's wonderful," Leandra said. "He helps people bring life onto this earth."

Essence showed me the at-home insemination kit she'd ordered from Amazon. "They make it hard to find," she told me. "They prefer you to go to a doctor." This was her sixth attempt at getting pregnant with donor sperm: You hoped for the best, got disappointed, and then you rallied yourself to try again. "I'm not medically trained, so I'm getting all my information from the Internet," she said.

The bathroom door creaked open and Ari emerged. "I left the cup on the sink," he said as he hustled me out the door so the women could complete the insemination.

We drove around Manhattan trying to find a club where a friend of his supposedly had bottle service. I asked if he'd actually Googled "Black lesbians" in the bathroom. "Well, yeah," he said. "They were a cute couple. I thought it would've been nice if they'd shared pictures with me. Sometimes they offer, if they want to feel like they're participating in some way." A cluster of college-aged students in small outfits trotted across the street as Ari watched them dispassionately. "I just ejaculated, so the motivation is gone," he said.

It was nearly 2:00 A.M. His phone dinged. He looked at it and sighed. Somewhere in Brooklyn, a woman was ovulating.

IN JUNE

IN JUNE 2020, Elaine again met Ari in New York, where she inserted a soft cup in the stifling back seat of her car, hidden behind a towel. It didn't take. By this point, she and Ari were talking every week. They discussed the logistics of getting her pregnant, but sometimes they just chatted. Elaine told him about Ember's pageants, and he shared stories about his many donor kids and their mothers. "I think he found me easy to talk to," Elaine said.

His life puzzled her. He didn't seem to have a fixed address; he was always bouncing around, crashing at a friend's, traveling for an IVF cycle. He spent two nights a week with the daughters he'd conceived with his first wife. Then there were the other two wives, though as far as Elaine could tell, they didn't have much involvement with Ari. A rabbi had divorced him from the religious woman, and although he was still technically married to the woman overseas, that didn't seem to trouble him. Through moderating the Facebook group, Elaine had heard about a number of nontraditional arrangements. Ari, though, was an outlier, not just because of the sheer number of children he'd fathered, but also because he kept in touch with many of them for years afterward; some he FaceTimed with nearly every day.

The more she learned, the more she questioned some of his choices. "He lives a very carefree life, the ultimate bachelor life," Elaine said. "He gets to bounce from house to house, and

he doesn't have to commit to anything or anybody. I know he wants to believe he's a father, but he doesn't have to be a father. He's more like—just a dad." In July, they met up again, this time in Louisville, where Ember was competing in a pageant. By this time she was working with a reproductive endocrinologist, taking fertility meds and getting her follicles checked, but she still didn't conceive.

She arranged to meet with two other donors who were well regarded in the Facebook groups to see what her other options were. She explained to them the arrangement she was looking for: The child knows you're the father, you visit once a year for their birthday, and every now and then I'll take us all on a trip. They were like, Sure! Whatever you want! But both men were NI donors, and she sensed that once the sex was over, they'd be out of the picture. Ari started to look better by comparison. She could count on him to stay involved. At the very least, he would never turn down a free vacation.

In November, Elaine traveled to New York for another attempt. Ari wanted to meet at the Museum of Natural History. He arrived two hours late with two of his biological daughters, who clung to his hands like they'd never let go. The girls watched him with an intensity that made Elaine nervous. The girls obsessed over their dad's attention so intently that they didn't even care about seeing the dinosaur bones. When he went into the bathroom with the soft cup, they fretted until he returned. She thought, *Your mom's going to have to make you a little bit stronger, because otherwise you're in for a world of hurt.* Any man who divided his affection into so many pieces was bound to leave some people feeling hungry.

He returned and handed the cup to Elaine. She took it into the women's restroom. She lay down on the blanket she'd brought and lifted her legs to insert the syringe. As she waited, a woman came in and asked her if she was okay. Elaine reassured her that she was just fine.

Mom, biological dad, and their newborn son.

"I'M IN THE PARK!" ARI BELLOWED. "IT'S ROMANTIC! BRING YOUR WIFE,

Two weeks later, when her period didn't come, she knew it had happened at last: She was pregnant.

THE DAY AFTER our visit to midtown, Ari and I met up at the apartment of a friend of his in Queens. It was the Jewish holiday Tisha B'Av and his friend was fasting, but Ari had lunch at Shake Shack. He told me that he's close to his parents, who are still devout, although they vocally disapprove of his lifestyle. His father frets that they didn't give him enough attention as a child; his mother tells him that he's bringing shame to the family. "Why can't you just be normal?" she says sometimes. Ari has tried to get them to bond with some of his dozens of donor children, but they aren't interested. "I hope I'm a better grandparent to my kids' children than they are to mine," he said.

The wider world didn't always get it, either. After the *Post* story ran, the New York State Department of Health sent him a letter informing him that running an unlicensed sperm bank was illegal. (Nothing ever came of it.) In 2018, Israel banned Ari from donating sperm there, citing a law requiring that donors accept the responsibilities and obligations of a father. As Ari saw it, he was doing just that, even if he was doing it for dozens of children at the same time. He appealed all the way to the Israeli Supreme Court, which ruled against him; the minister of health ordered clinics to destroy all remaining vials of his frozen sperm. He found ways to keep donating there anyway. Last year, to help a woman who already had a kid by him and wanted another, he tried to donate under his brother's name. He borrowed his brother's passport, figuring it was better if he didn't ask permission first. "He doesn't *want* to know," Ari said. "If I tell him, he has to tell his wife, and that's going to get messy." The clinic got suspicious and notified Ari's brother, who then called Ari. By then the clinic had threatened to call the police and arrest the woman, but ultimately it backed off.

Ari admitted he was willing to bend rules that he saw as unfair or illogical. The system seemed set up to promote a certain kind of family—heterosexual, nuclear—and if you didn't fit that mold, everything was harder and more expensive. To help simplify the process for prospective mothers he donated to, he'd sign affidavits stating that they lived together, shared bank accounts, whatever. Sure, it was a lie, but it wasn't illegal. If you told a clinic you were a donor, not a partner, they might throw up all sorts of roadblocks: medical tests, psychological counseling, a meeting with a lawyer. Some clinics in the U. S. had gotten wise to him, which made the process trickier. He advised women to find a clinic that wasn't familiar with him.

As Ari drove us into Manhattan, he explained that his life wasn't as carefree as Elaine assumed. For one, he was financially strapped. Five mothers with nine of his biological children between them had sued him for child support; half his mediocre academic paycheck was garnished to pay those bills. "It wasn't the poorest mothers who sued me," he told me. Anonymous sperm-bank donors typically can't sue for custody or be sued for child support, but DIY donors have no such protections; in many states, courts won't honor agreements

born in Ghana in May 2020 while the woman was stuck back in the U. S., unable to fly to collect her child. Months later, she'd finally made it to Ghana, but now officials were telling her she couldn't leave with the baby since she wasn't its biological parent. She and her sister called Ari every day, begging him to come to Ghana to help them sort it all out. They had an appointment at the embassy in a few weeks. Ari was pretty sure he would go, but he hadn't bought the plane ticket yet.

ARI THOUGHT THE BEST QUALITY he could give his donor children was not his height or his mathematical abilities but his disposition. He was a genuinely happy person. At times, he seemed bizarrely free of worry. Many anecdotes he told hinted at the drama that comes when you mess around with elemental forces: sex, babies, family, money. And at the center of it all, there was Ari, skimming along the surface, surrounded by intensity but never quite touched by it. His family loved him but didn't understand him. As a counterbalance, he'd surrounded himself with people who appreciated the risks he took and who showered him with affection for it. Outside the sperm world, Ari was suspect, strange—but inside it, he could be benevolent and admired and rewarded with as many hugs as he wanted. Sometimes he struck me as a person who could love broadly but not deeply. If so, he'd found a remarkable way to put that deficit to use.

In Harlem, we met up with Devin Biggs-Vanderhorst and Shawn Vanderhorst, a warm, teasing couple, and their daughter, Khari-Avia, an inquisitive four-year-old who was conceived with Ari's sperm. "Dad!" Khari-Avia squeaked when Ari stepped in the door, flinging herself at his knees. As we walked to Central Park, Ari texted with a throuple who were driving down from Connecticut to retrieve a donation. Ari volunteered Devin and Shawn's bathroom for the job. "Wouldn't be the first time," Devin said, laughing.

Before Covid, Devin and Shawn regularly socialized with other parents who'd used Ari's sperm. They referred to one another's children as their nieces and nephews. The women called themselves Ari's baby mamas, and around sixty of them were members of a private Facebook group where they planned playdates and got into fights and talked about what it was like when a teacher asked their kid to draw a picture of his family and he needed extra sheets of paper to fit everyone in. Some of the families had joint birthday parties and went on group vacations; women banded together to throw a new mother a baby shower. "We will always support each other, because so many people in the outside world are against us," Devin told me. "Nobody else knows what it's like to be an Ari baby mama."

I thought of these complex, shifting, supportive arrangements later, when I watched Ari's

BRING YOUR GIRLFRIEND. I'll bend you over a bench; WE'LL MAKE A BABY!"

that attempt to absolve the donor of responsibility.

It saddened him sometimes that he couldn't provide financial support to all of the children he'd fathered and to their families. He'd cosigned a car loan for one struggling couple, but after a few months they stopped making payments, and he received an $8,000 bill that was due this week. There was no way he could pay it. He didn't hold it against the couple; they were planning an Orlando vacation together, in fact.

Some of the mothers begged him to be more judicious about whom he donated to: Maybe don't give sperm to, say, the eighteen-year-old living in a homeless shelter. Other men in the Facebook groups, concerned about being sued for support, would ask to see women's pay stubs and screenshots of bank account balances before they'd provide a donation. But Ari felt that it wasn't really his place to judge who should or shouldn't be a mother. Take that woman who'd been homeless—she was in a much better place now, married and expecting her second child.

Ari's cavalier attitude sometimes resulted in serious complications. In 2019, he donated sperm to an American woman who used a donor egg and a surrogate in Ghana. Everything went according to plan—until the pandemic hit. The baby was

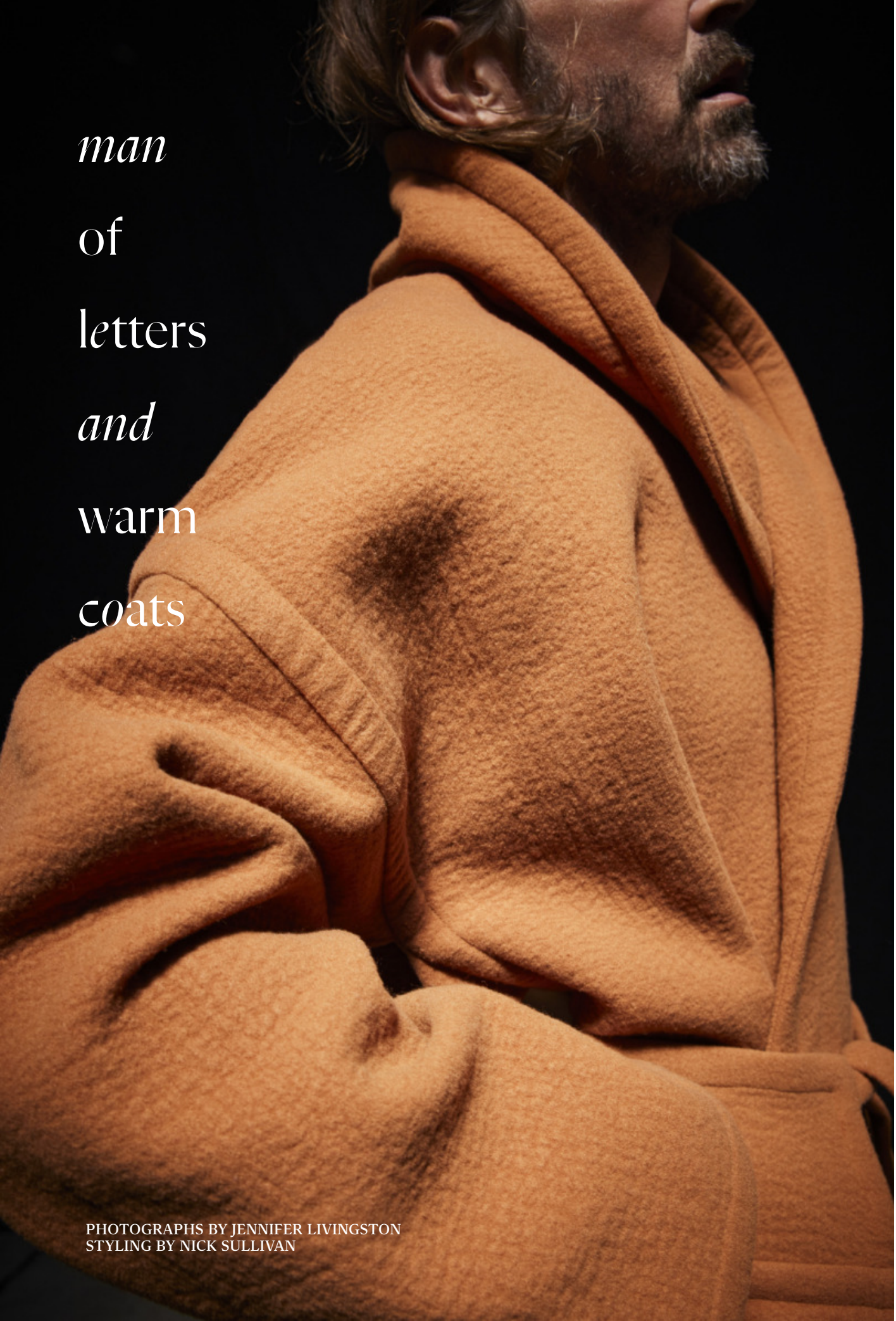
appearance on *The Dr. Oz Show,* where Dr. Oz furrowed his brow and told Ari he was "twisting" the family, "the building block of society." Who's to say what a family is? I wanted to ask Dr. Oz.

In the park, as Ari dashed around with Khari-Avia, Devin told me that she hadn't really known her own dad. Recently, Shawn, a Facebook wizard, had tracked down Devin's paternal grandmother. Not only was she still alive; she lived just a few streets away. Devin had gone to her ninety-second-birthday party, and although it was a happy occasion, she couldn't stop thinking about all the missed years. She didn't want Khari-Avia to grow up not knowing her father, having that question mark at the center of her identity. "Ari's an amazing guy. He loves his children, and he also gives us the choice to raise them in the structure we want. He's not invasive," she said. She glanced over at Ari, who was handing out water balloons to a group of children whose glee teetered on the edge of hysteria. "She understands he's not an in-home dad. She understands that he's got other kids. But she knows her dad is there if she needs him."

The throuple called to let Ari know they'd arrived. "I'm in the park!" he bellowed into the phone. "It's romantic! Bring your wife, bring your girlfriend. I'll bend you over a bench; we'll make a baby!" Devin glared at him, but he was oblivious. "He has these Ari-isms," she said apologetically. "But I cringe."

When we found the throuple outside Devin and Shawn's apartment, they were giddy with anticipation. LaKeisha Dukes, a bus driver for the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, had brought her wife and girlfriend along for the insemination. LaKeisha was wearing Crocs, just like Ari. "This kid is gonna be a nerd," she said.

We crowded into the apartment and waited for Ari to produce his sample. LaKeisha looked at the poster-sized photo of newborn Khari-Avia on the wall, and (continued on page 116)



man of letters *and* warm coats

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JENNIFER LIVINGSTON
STYLING BY NICK SULLIVAN

Lee Pace is a science-fiction head, a star of the show *Foundation,* Twitter's new crush, and an all-around good guy. He also looks great in this season's most stylish outerwear.

BY MATT MILLER

This page: Coat ($14,200) by **Gucci;** tank ($25) by **Gap;** jeans ($60) by **Levi's.** Opposite: Robe coat by **Louis Vuitton Men's.**

This page: Coat ($5,100) and sweater ($1,100) by **Prada;**
jeans ($215) by **AG;** shoes ($169) by **Moral Code;**
Chronomat B01 42 watch ($8,250) by **Breitling;** socks ($21) by **Falke.**

LEE PACE AND I HAVE FORMED A SCI-FI BOOK CLUB. HIS IDEA. Without anyone intending it, dinner at a Japanese restaurant in Brooklyn has turned into our club's unofficial first meeting. There's *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dune*, of course, which the actor has read more times than he remembers. He also sings the praises of his favorite writer, Ursula K. Le Guin, and the universe-rattling *Three-Body Problem*, by Cixin Liu. He pulls out his Kindle to show me the Bobiverse series, which he's currently reading, and to download a couple books I suggest (Ann Leckie's *Ancillary Justice* and Arkady Martine's *A Memory Called Empire*). I have no doubt he'll read them immediately. "We have to get back together and discuss," he says.

Pace strikes me as not just a fan but a scholar of sci-fi, a world where bona fides count for a lot and fakers get no respect. His reading list may come as a relief to the millions who know Pace, age forty-two, for his roles in some of the biggest sci-fi and fantasy franchises of all time. He played Thranduil the Elvenking in the *Hobbit* series, Ronan the Accuser in Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* and *Captain Marvel*. Not to mention the vampire Garrett in the *Twilight* saga. Now he's adding another character to that list: Galactic Emperor Cleon on Apple TV+'s *Foundation*, based on the Isaac Asimov series from the 1940s and '50s. The novels are often credited with inspiring *Stars* both *Wars* and *Trek* and defined science fiction for modern fans.

Nonscholars, here's the gist: Pace's Emperor Cleon has ruled the sprawling Galactic Empire for generations as a series of genetic clonelike successors, with absolute power. And he looks good doing it. When a trailer for the series dropped this past summer, it caused something of a social-media fervor, with fans online calling Pace an "Intergalactic Emperor Daddy."

"I'm deeply flattered," he says of the distinction. "My mother would be so proud."

He's laughing, but honestly, *Foundation* is serious business that comes at a serious time. Our dinner-cum-book-club took place a few days after the release of a grim United Nations report on our future. You know the one: We can no longer stop climate change from intensifying over the next thirty years, but there is a chance we can mitigate the worst possible outcome if we act right away.

"That sounds like a line from *Foundation*, doesn't it?" Pace says of the report's top line. The world of *Foundation* is based on the fall of the Roman Empire, and it begins with a mathematician predicting the fall of the Galactic Empire. He's got a plan to shorten the dark age that will follow, but time isn't on the Galactic Empire's side. Depending on your personality, it's either the best or the worst possible viewing for our apocalyptic times.

Pace is in the first camp: "That thing, change, is the only thing you can bet on, that things will change. What the Cleons are hoping for is this imperishable permanence. You can't do that. That's not the way it works."

Pace is the best kind of climate optimist in that he can acknowledge that "there's a limit to control" without giving up. He's on the leadership council of Conservation International and has traveled with the group's scientists. "I feel like, hopefully, some of us during Covid have had the experience of a way of life that doesn't involve overconsumption and all the things that we know we should be a bit more mindful about, but we're spoiled, so we can't help ourselves," Pace says.

Ironically, for a climate activist, Pace is probably best known for playing characters who lack the physical fragility that actual humans in the grip of climate change have: an elf, a vampire, a Trumpian space king, and, most memorably, a pie maker, Ned, with the gift and curse of bringing people back to life on the cult hit *Pushing Daisies*. The show ran for only twenty-two episodes in the late 2000s, but it's enjoying a reanimation thanks to HBO Max. Pace did a rewatch of his own alongside the new and old fans and compared notes. More than a decade later, he finds himself wishing to be back at the Pie Hole, with Ned's friends. Will there be a second life for a show about bringing back the dead?

"I mean, we always joke about it, fantasize about it. I know [creator] Bryan [Fuller]'s told me his ideas for it, and they sound so cool. Everyone's busy doing different things. I would love to be with everyone again. Yeah, I mean I'm game for it," Pace says. Until then, there's a stack of new books on both of our nightstands to keep us busy.

This page: Coat ($3,250) by **Canali X 8on8;** turtleneck ($795) by **Canali.** Opposite: Coat ($3,925), sweater ($3,200), and track pants ($1,475) by **Hermès;** sneakers ($149) by **Moral Code.**

When a trailer for the new series dropped this past summer, it caused a social-media fervor, with fans calling Pace an "Intergalactic Emperor Daddy." "I'm deeply flattered," he says. "My mother would be so proud."

This page: Coat ($2,495) and jeans ($99) by **Polo Ralph Lauren.** Opposite: Coat ($5,800), sweater ($1,795), and trousers ($1,025) by **Giorgio Armani;** watch by **Tudor.**

This page: Coat, jacket ($3,200), and trousers by **Dior Men;**
boots ($1,095) by **Christian Louboutin;**
Black Bay Fifty-eight 925 watch ($4,300) by **Tudor.**
Opposite: Coat ($4,800) and sweater ($895) by **Fendi Men's;**
trousers ($1,350) by **the Row;**
Chronomaster Revival Safari watch ($9,000) by **Zenith.**

FOR STORE INFORMATION SEE PAGE 117. GROOMING BY MELISSA DEZARATE FOR KALPANA.

LEAVING AFGHANISTAN BEHIND

THE LONGEST WAR IN OUR NATION'S HISTORY IS NOW OVER. AS THESE SIX EYEWITNESS PERSPECTIVES ATTEST—A COMMANDING GENERAL, A SNIPER, AN INTERPRETER, AND OTHERS—ALTHOUGH THE FIGHTING IS DONE, THE BATTLE OVER ITS MEMORY IS JUST BEGINNING.

by MATT GALLAGHER

U. S. soldiers in the aftermath of an IED attack, Kandahar, 2011.

FEW WARS GET CLEAN ENDS.

Some here in America may want that small grace for Afghanistan as surely as some there deserve it, but in this way, war's like life. Being deserving just makes you a target.

It began clean enough. The United States invaded in the weeks after 9/11, at the behest of George W. Bush, to dismantle and destroy the Al Qaeda terrorist group who'd attacked us. We sought something between justice and vengeance. Once Al Qaeda and its Taliban enablers had been defeated, the original mission accomplished, we stayed. Once Osama bin Laden was killed, in neighboring Pakistan, we stayed. We stayed and we stayed and we stayed.

We stayed for democracy at one point, human rights at another. To nation-build, if you believed in counterinsurgency, or to "mow the grass"—a euphemism for killing terrorists that admits doing so will produce more—if you favored counterterrorism.

Somewhere along the way, the war lost public interest and support. Those matter in a republic, though one could be forgiven for getting lulled into thinking otherwise the past twenty years. The war's justification became the war's existence itself, and that's a twisted reason to keep killing people in the name of country, as well as risking the lives of our own.

A ghoul of a question hovered over the rapid Taliban advancement in the summer of 2021: How? How had two decades of blood and treasure left a porous apparatus either unwilling or unable to defend itself? U.S. personnel had tried to build the Afghan security forces in our own image, with a national army and special operations and a core belief that the military can and should do more than engage the enemy on battlefields.

The hubris of it all. *In our own image.* Hold up a mirror and you may not like what you see.

Even in this shared defeat, we want—we seem to need—to make it about us. So big-brained pontificators and TV squawkers made grand declarations about the ugly withdrawal marking our late-imperial decline. The tail of the American Century, the death knell of star-spangled exceptionalism. The end of something, certainly, and the end of something demands hysterics.

Sometimes, though, tragedy is just tragedy. Sometimes meaning is only more noise.

A tragedy's coda: Thirteen American service members and more than 170 Afghan civilians were killed in the suicide bombing on August 26 at Kabul's airport. It's the bleakest of ironies that those troops who died did so with a moral purpose not seen in the war for some years. They died trying to shepherd strangers to safety, twenty-year-old Marines among the final casualties of a war their same age.

The Afghanistan war's end was brought about by a commander-in-chief who took seriously his pledge to do so. He's a military father, and that may've made the difference. Joe Biden faced down a lot of entrenched institutional forces to follow through, and future historians should credit him that resolve. America's broader "forever war"—an amorphous term, loathed by many national-security experts because it allows regular citizens to understand—continues, but who knows what the Afghanistan withdrawal augurs. Nothing lasts forever, not even forever wars.

Did it have to end like *this,* though? With allies braving Taliban checkpoints and desperate mobs for the mere chance to get on an airplane? With rawboned U.S. Marines and paratroopers holding the line, gripping cocked rifles in one hand and reaching for Afghan babies with the other, all under the constant threat of another bombing?

It did not. Anyone who says differently either has bought a political lie or is selling the same. We have our eyes and basic sense, if we're willing to use them. One hard truth is that no matter what, some allies would've been left behind. Another is that the logistical marvel of evacuating more than 120,000 people in a month's time does not atone for the lack of planning that necessitated the feat.

The U.S. Air Force rescued human beings in Kabul. It did not rescue talking points for the Biden administration.

Americans found strength after 9/11 by saying "never forget." Now, with Afghanistan, a lot of people will try their damnedest to, because what happened—what's still happening—hurts and disgusts, shames and frightens. Still others will attempt to warp what occurred for reasons far more cynical than avoidance.

We must seek to wrest some truth while we can. To know truth, one must first find it, and finding truth is much harder than just alluding to it. Six lives and stories shaped by the Afghanistan war follow. They are not comprehensive. They represent distinct perspectives and time frames and motivations. Wars, especially ones that last as long as Afghanistan's, defy coherence. When placed alongside and in contrast with one another, perhaps these experiences bring readers closer to what it all was and will continue to be.

The American war in Afghanistan has ended. Now begins the war over its memory.

THE GENERAL

THEY CALLED HIM King David, once upon a time. The thinking man's general who would save both the war in Afghanistan and America's pride.

For good or ill, it's impossible to reckon with the war on terror without examining the legacy of David Petraeus. Petraeus is one of its few generals who breached public consciousness. He's sixty-eight now, retired from the military but still carrying and conducting himself like a wartime commander. It's probably hard to stop being a general, in fairness.

I find him sitting alone in a corner of the Metropolitan Club's penthouse bar, in a crisp banker's suit, hunched over his phone. This private social club maintains an old-society presence off Central Park, a sanctuary for New York's elite for generations. We meet a few weeks before Kabul's fall, as the withdrawal from Afghanistan begins in earnest.

"This is not going to end the endless war. It's going to end our involvement in it," Petraeus says. "I fear that the endless war is actually going to get worse."

He goes on to cite those fears, some of them prescient: An Afghan civil war. A refugee crisis. A safe haven for radical jihadism to flourish. He's professorial and didactic in his delivery; it's not hard to see why then president Bush turned to him after the failed bluster of Donald Rumsfeld and friends, or later why then president Obama tapped him to try to salvage the Afghanistan campaign. But as ever, the question with Petraeus's counterinsurgency pitch is time. How much longer would the long war—the longest war—need to be?

"It's a generational challenge," Petraeus says; we "should not define it with decades, much less a few years . . . . You just have to keep at it."

COIN—the pithy abbreviation for counterinsur-

PRECEDING PAGES: JOHANNES EISELE/AFP/GETTY IMAGES

David Petraeus, the former commander of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, says we withdrew too soon.

gency—has aged like milk. At its plainest, the strategy seeks to separate insurgent guerrillas from the population that produced them. Petraeus's version involved a lot of money and messy compromise and, again, too much time. America changes its governments, and different governments will have different ideas on war and peace. But for all the cash COIN required to turn insurgents into nominal allies, for all its overcooked hearts-and-minds practices, parts of it worked. I was there, in Iraq in 2007 and 2008, as a young officer, when COIN brought calm to a people desperate for it.

I should disclose here I still have mixed feelings about the whole enterprise. That calm was real, as was the ability to bring home alive every soldier in my scout platoon. But we bribed the hell out of tribal leaders. That was dirty. And the relief our actions brought proved temporary. Even then, we feared it couldn't last without American soldiers on every neighborhood corner. Lo and behold, a few years after we left, ISIS claimed much of Iraq as part of its caliphate.

When Petraeus assumed command of the Afghanistan war in 2010, a year after the troop surge began there, the dream was to replicate that calm. This included doubling down on building the national army in the American military's likeness. A national army meant that soldiers of various Afghan ethnic groups would invariably serve in regions populated by other groups, no minor thing in a tribal society. So Pashtun farmers in Helmand Province were pitched on the wisdom of burning their poppy fields by armed outsiders, be they a grizzled sergeant from Atlanta or an ethnic Tajik from the Panjshir Valley.

Four hundred ninety-eight U.S. troops were killed in 2010, the deadliest year of the war for America—a gruesome by-product of COIN's mandate to push into remote areas. An additional 411 were killed in 2011. Estimates for Afghan security casualties range wildly, but a 2013 examination determined that more than 60 percent of their losses since the war began had occurred in just the three preceding years.

The bodies outpaced the gains. So the war outlasted COIN; Obama announced a troop drawdown in the summer of 2011, and the Afghanistan surge ended the following year. By then, King David had returned home and become director of the CIA.

A decade later, in the Metropolitan Club, the details still nip at Petraeus: The public's expectation that COIN could serve as a one-size-fits-all panacea, despite the many differences between Iraq and Afghanistan. The domestic political considerations that led Obama to announce the drawdown, which, in the retired general's view, emboldened the enemy. And then there's what he refers to as inputs: "Not only the right number of forces . . . the right big ideas, the right leaders, the right other resources, from diplomatic contributions, aid development, intelligence, various international efforts. It took us fully ten years to get all that right."

Recalling what went well, ruminating over the what-ifs: Petraeus is like any old soldier in this regard. Though, of course, he's not any old soldier. He was the HMFIC—the head motherfucker in charge. I try a few times to interject, but he is a forever general, and I am a forever junior captain, at least in the confines of the Metropolitan Club. He points out that both his son and his daughter-in-law served in Afghanistan. He's not unfamiliar with the impossible demands COIN places on young leaders.

His next appointment arrives. I think to hell with it and ask what every veteran through the eons has probably wanted to ask their former commander. Does he have any regrets? Is there anything from the war that keeps him up at night?

For two, maybe three seconds, Petraeus seems almost shaken.

"I'll never forget," he begins, "we had Apache gunships on patrol in eastern Afghanistan, a very

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MALIKE SIDIBE

mountainous area, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning. Through their thermals, they thought they saw men with rifles. We did a lot of checking, there were no friendlies around, so, 'Okay, we've got to engage them. They're hostile.'" His voice holds steady. "They were teenage boys collecting sticks for construction."

The regret expressed is of a tactical variety, not a strategic decision. Still, I think, it's a genuine response.

He pauses. "I mean, we're supposed to be protecting the people."

THE SNIPER

NICHOLAS IRVING CONVEYS the seriousness of a man who's traveled to the edge. He served in the U.S. Army for six years, all with the prestigious 3rd Ranger Battalion. He deployed to combat six times, three tours each in Iraq and Afghanistan. Some folks still know him as the Reaper. It's a nickname he earned when, as a direct-action sniper in the Taliban stronghold of Kandahar, he killed thirty-three enemy insurgents, with a dozen more "probables," he says. "We just never found the bodies."

That was in 2009, back when Afghanistan was the *other* war, the forgotten one, perhaps best evidenced by then joint chiefs chairman Admiral Michael Mullen saying, "In Iraq, we do what we must," while "in Afghanistan, we do what we can."

Irving is not a vet-bro trying to peddle a product like some public-facing operator types. Want to hear about the machinations of Hollywood, where he sometimes works as a consultant on action films? He'll tell you. Want to know what killing people is like, or what watching a friend bleed out will take from a person? He'll tell you about that, too.

"We got ambushed," he says, describing a 2009 firefight in southern Afghanistan. "The ground opened up with fire; it was weird. We jumped headfirst into this ravine and started fighting from there. My friend, Corporal Benjamin Kopp, got hit first, in his femoral artery. And I remember the blood and stuff flowing down the river." He turned to his platoon leader, saying, "We need to move; we need to get to the safe haven." As Irving spoke, his PL got shot in the chest. "A splash of water hit my face. But it wasn't water; it was his blood." The PL survived. Corporal Kopp did not. The gun battle lasted for twelve hours; after beginning the mission with 210 rounds of ammunition, Irving says he had six bullets left. "A crazy, crazy day," he says.

I'll admit it: Irving surprised me. I didn't anticipate the Reaper, a bona fide snatcher of souls, to make an impassioned anti-war statement.

But he did.

It's late June when we speak, so the withdrawal is still a matter of why, not how. At his home in San Antonio, Irving, thirty-four, says he supports it "100 percent . . . . My stance is completely different than it was. What's changed for me is nothing's changed over there. We got bin Laden a long time ago.

Nicholas Irving, a former sniper for the Army Rangers, deployed to combat six times, three tours each in Iraq and Afghanistan.

"I DON'T HAVE A BAD TASTE IN MY *a former Army Rangers sniper.* **"BUT I WOULD SON JOIN** *the military, at*

"It's watching young guys go over there and do the same thing I was doing. The whole purpose of us going was so they wouldn't have to," he says.

We discuss various divides in contemporary America. As a Black man who served in the predominantly white special-operations community, Irving knows those divisions all too well. "You had a few guys who were flat-out racist, legit about it," he says. A couple times, fellow Rangers called him the *n*-word. "On the shooting range, people had this assumption that I might be really good at drive-bys." He "would usually just outshoot them" to shut them up.

There's a through line from Afghanistan to now, as Irving sees it. He has a hard time understanding why fellow military veterans insist on being at the forefront of some of these divides—the January 6 attack on the United States Capitol, for example, when Air Force veteran Ashli Babbitt was shot and killed by a Capitol Police officer while climbing through a window in a bar-

Marines field-grade officer "Leila" spoke to us on the condition of anonymity; she's still on active duty with Marine Forces Special Operations Command.

MOUTH *from the military," says Irving,* **NOT let my son go. I would NOT LET MY** *all,* **IN ANY CAPACITY."**

ricaded door. "It's just way too much fighting," he says. "You got to get tired of it at some point."

Irving left the Army in 2010. Life initially lacked the structure and purpose he'd relied upon in the Rangers. Post-traumatic stress shadowed him, and he struggled with alcohol. He returned to war as a contractor because he missed the life.

He credits the birth of his son, in 2016, with saving him from a spiral of violence and depression. "Everything changed," he says. "I stopped drinking, started reading more philosophy. I didn't intend for it to happen, it just did, and I realized how much better it is to be in a settled state of mind . . . to not be paranoid and angry all the time."

Every old soldier with children knows the conversations that await. About killing and death and culpability and so much more. Irving is ironclad about how he'll handle it.

"I don't have a bad taste in my mouth from the military," he says. "But I would not let my son go. I would not let my son join the military, at all, in any capacity."

THE MARINE

YES, THE AFGHANISTAN war involved strategic gambits. Yes, it involved turning men to pink mist through a sniper's scope. It also contained the jagged dimensionalities of life lived between briefings and firefights, where people from starkly different backgrounds learned to work together and trust in the pursuit of shared victory and peace.

"There's some things you can only solve with violence. We have to have an edge and be willing to use it," says a Marines field-grade officer I'll call Leila. We're speaking a couple weeks before the Taliban return to power, but it's a matter of when at this point, not if. "There was duality, though. There's so much beauty in Afghanistan, between the mountains and valleys. And the people, too. They're survivors. I learned so much from them. I feel a lot of gratitude for the time that I got to spend there, in spite of the tragedy."

Leila is in her late thirties, a senior staff officer devoted to supporting and developing the next generation of Marine Raiders. She agreed to speak on the condition of anonymity, both because she's still on active duty with MARSOC (Marine Forces Special Operations Command) and because, by her own admission, she's still figuring out exactly how she feels about the war.

Leila served in Afghanistan four times, in 2010, in '12, from '13 to '14, and most recently from '20 to '21. She spent thirty-four months there, the vast chunk of it in Helmand Province. COIN, counterterror, advise-and-assist: Leila did it all. Tracing her career is like wandering the maze of our post-9/11 campaigns, even if they seemed to always return her to Helmand.

One of the most visceral moments of Leila's life happened on her second tour there, shortly after surviving a bombing. "Our MRAP"—mine-resistant ambush protected vehicle—"struck an IED; the front was completely destroyed," she says. "The speed of the explosion was really shocking. Everything slows down, and your training kicks in. All your senses are heightened." Two hours later, back at the compound they were using as a base, an Afghan ally prepared a meal, "this amazing mixture of okra and tomatoes with fresh bread," Leila says. "My lip was busted. It was hard to chew. Still, the best food I've ever eaten in my life. That's just part of the duality between the war and the beautiful aspects of the culture and the landscape that can get lost."

Anecdotally, I've found that spec-ops types feel better about their experiences than veterans of conventional units. The why seems obvious enough. Midnight raids from the holy above to find enemies with blood on their hands bring clarity. Clarity matters in war. Clarity is purpose renewed. Leila has served in both types of units. Her understanding of the conflict transcends the typical keyhole perspectives.

Post-COIN, the already heavy burden on special operations increased, kill-or-capture raids and

Khalil Arab lives with his brother in Houston. Many of their relatives are still in Afghanistan, unable to flee.

improvements in the quality of local security elements their twin focuses. Like many who deployed with special-operations forces during these years, Leila is adamant that she saw real progress, both on the battlefield and in political reconciliation efforts. The notions of the American public regarding Afghanistan may have already set, but the war ground on, both through night-vision green and from the splintered clouds overhead—an eightfold increase of bombs and air strikes occurred between 2015 and 2019, topping off at about twenty a day.

Another formative war story comes from Leila's third deployment, when she befriended and mentored a young Afghan officer named Obaid. "Our Afghan partners . . . were pretty much operating independently. They were only using us if they needed air support or QRF"—quick reaction force—Leila says. "This was a huge step."

Afghan commandos such as Obaid came from all over the country, from every ethnic group and tribe. They were elite and, like their American counterparts, the proven best. Mass-producing such people for an entire national army may well have taken the decades Petraeus suggested. As the Taliban swept through Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, a lot of government security forces laid down their weapons without firing a shot, but some did choose to fight, and fought well. Many of this set belonged to commando units. Early reports indicate a developing resistance among these units to the new regime.

Obaid will not be among them. Six months after Leila redeployed to the States, he was killed by a sniper while helping to retake a district center from the Taliban. "He had a wife and two-year-old daughter somewhere," she says. "I don't know what happened to them."

Unlike most of the approximately eight hundred thousand Americans who served in Afghanistan, Leila was able to say goodbye to both the war and the country. Having deployed in 2020 as part of an advisory task force—no more night foot patrols, no more trips to countryside bazaars—the end seemed very much near. While waiting on the tarmac in Helmand, she tried to make sense of it all.

"It was sad to leave," Leila says carefully. She's still on active duty, after all. "However things play out, we did the best we could with the resources we had and the time we had it." She sighs. Leila spent a professional lifetime fighting America's post-9/11 wars. She represents a generation of service members in this way. What of victory? What of peace?

"Mixed feelings, I guess."

THE INTERPRETER

KHALIL ARAB IS a man caught between. He's between his old life left behind and a new one across the sea. He's between war and peace, that strange, ambered state that's trapped many a seeker over the centuries. He's between tragedy and good fortune, having escaped militants who wanted him dead while so many others did not escape, nor will. More than anything, he tells me, he's lucky—and grateful—to be in America on a special immigrant visa, available to Afghans who worked for U.S. forces and whose lives became threatened as a result. He says so again and again.

But that doesn't mean he's had it easy.

"I feel responsible," Arab says, from the apartment in Houston he shares with his brother. We're discussing his family in Afghanistan and the many ramifications his work for America some years ago had on them, and may still. "I felt it was the right thing. But because of the toll that it took, if I could go back in time, having to make the same decision again, I wouldn't."

Like many involved with this war, Arab, thirty-five, is facing down the relentlessness of the past mostly by himself. There's a quiet melancholy to him, one I hear over Zoom in the dead of July, as the Taliban swirl across uncontested rural pockets of Afghanistan.

"There's this old song about a bird who is kept in a golden cage. 'A cage is a cage / Even though it's a golden one,'" he says. "I think this is a very interesting analogy for all who are displaced, not just Afghans."

Born and raised in Herat, an ancient trading city along the Silk Road in northwestern Afghanistan, Arab, then a teen, watched the initial air strikes of the 2001 invasion from neighborhood rooftops. "Seeing the rockets actually hit the targets, the Taliban strongholds, it was a moment of jubilee," he says. "It was not just destruction but the promise to a new future." He began his career as an interpreter for police contractors a couple years later at Herat's Regional Training Center, helping to mold a modern security force for a new Afghanistan. "I never worked for the forces that fought on the front line," Arab says. "Most terps"—short for interpreters—"didn't. But it was never an easy job. It was always dangerous. It always came with a price tag."

In 2010, while working as an interpreter for the

"I FELT IT WAS THE RIGHT THING," ARAB SAYS OF *his job as an interpreter for U.S. forces.* *"But because of* THE TOLL THAT IT TOOK, if I could go back in time, having to make the same decision again, I wouldn't."

Guardia di Finanza, an Italian unit that specializes in counter-drug trafficking, Arab received a letter from the Taliban. They claimed he'd violated sharia law, and they made vague references to earthly and eternal punishments. Everyone in Herat knew such letters weren't empty gestures. The Taliban did not make those.

Somehow, at the height of the American occupation, home was now the most dangerous place in the world for Arab to be.

His father found the letter in their courtyard on his way to the mosque. By sheer luck, Arab was on leave, backpacking through India. He stayed put and he stayed away. A vagabond decade spent bouncing around Asia and Europe followed. In 2013, he began applying for a small but expanding American program—the special immigrant visa, or SIV. Then he waited. And waited. He waited until late 2019, when he finally boarded a flight to the United States, approved packet in hand.

Arab wants to become a citizen so he can vote, and he speaks with amazement about the First Amendment. He's religiously agnostic, so the old devout Muslim in him has no problem raving about nearby Pinkerton's Barbecue. "I could make it as a vegetarian in Europe," he says. "Not in Texas." He and his brother—also an SIV recipient—have plans for their own trucking company.

Arab and I keep in touch through the summer, as the Taliban advance across Afghanistan. Zaranj falls. Then Kunduz. Then goes Herat, albeit not without a fight; unlike in some other areas, its security forces fought back, Arab says with pride. "Three hundred Taliban dead," he says. "That's what people are saying to each other for strength."

While Arab's family in Afghanistan relocates within the country to avoid identification, he struggles with what to do with himself. He's devoted many months to human-rights organizations as a volunteer SIV advocate. Now what? He doesn't know what to do with this sense of helplessness. He goes on long drives just to get out of his apartment, trips to nowhere through the sprawl of Texas.

"It's been an absolute nightmare," he says. "We had the time to do this right, to get people out. In April. In May. Now good people will die."

This is not notional for Arab. The wife of his brother in Houston has been waiting years for an interview for her sponsored visa. It was pushed back many times due to scheduling conflicts, bureaucratic inertia, the pandemic. The very day the Taliban enter Kabul, the American Embassy reaches out to say they've expedited her request. But she lives on the other side of Afghanistan. She travels four hundred miles through Taliban checkpoints to the capital to try to claim her place on an evacuating aircraft. She's refused entry some days. She's forced from the chaotic mob surrounding Kabul's airport other days. But then, near the end of it all, Arab's brothers who remain in Afghanistan use brute strength to push her through to an American government contact, who in turn gets her on a plane. She's soon to reunite with her husband.

Arab's not sure he'll ever see his parents again. Getting hold of them proves trickier by the day. He suspects the Taliban are messing with the Internet and telephone lines. I ask another question about that, but his mind keeps drifting, to the choices of the past, to the other interpreters he knew and befriended who didn't get out. To the unlucky ones.

"We had the time," he says again.

THE LIEUTENANT

OTIS HATFIELD WAS four on 9/11. He grew up in lower Manhattan, ten minutes from the World Trade Center, and vaguely remembers being evacuated, rushing uptown with his mother, turning to take in the burning towers. "I don't know how many of those images are real or built in

Otis Hatfield, one of the last U.S. soldiers to leave Afghanistan.

after the fact," he says. "But the aftermath in the neighborhood lasted for years."

Hatfield, now twenty-four, belongs to a new generation of Americans who've only known their country at war. What that means on the macro belongs to the sociologists, but for Hatfield it helped inspire a sense of duty. He wanted to become a soldier. He started building scale models of epic World War II battles in his bedroom. In middle school, he became a "COIN obsessive," reading General Petraeus's counterinsurgency manual while his friends absorbed *Harry Potter*.

His parents, an art dealer and a museum director, didn't dissuade their only child from this dream, but they also didn't know what to do with it. In 2010—not that long ago, or a lifetime back, depending—they sought an after-school tutor for their coltish son. I sent my CV. His mom replied, explaining that, yes, they needed a tutor, but more than that they wanted a mentor who might speak about war in a way that didn't glorify it. Could I do that, too?

I agreed. Yet I still wonder: Is there a way a man can tell a boy about the ruin of conflict that won't feed fascination? Is there a way an adult can tell a child about the mistakes of the past that won't be absorbed into the conviction of a wiser tomorrow?

This past August, Lieutenant Otis Hatfield, infantry platoon leader in the 10th Mountain Division, returned home from Afghanistan, a newly minted veteran. Two decades' worth of American soldiers have made this dizzying odyssey, and he's among the very last. Did he get the war he wanted?

Does anyone?

"I don't really remember what I expected," he says with a shrug. "Wasn't what went down, I know that."

They arrived at Kandahar Airfield last November, just after the American election. Sure, the president-elect had campaigned on ending the war. But so had both his immediate predecessors. The war had been there most of Hatfield's life, a distant proving ground as certain as the sun. Why would it go anywhere, especially now that he'd finally gotten to it?

Hatfield and his platoon conducted one patrol before word came down: No more of those. About half his soldiers then received orders home, only a few weeks after they'd arrived. Hatfield got sent to Resolute Support headquarters in Kabul, where an operations-center officer was needed. Six months of staff life followed. While it may not have been what an eager infantry lieutenant desires, it allowed him a direct view of the machinations of the withdrawal.

"Retrograde," he corrects me, a few times, using the official military term for our departure.

Hatfield was part of the quiet extraction in the dead of night from Bagram Airfield in July. He spent a few weeks in Kuwait at Camp Buehring, a sort of halfway house between war and civilization through which an entire generation of American service members passed on their way home. Every soldier there, Hatfield included, watched through phone screens as the country they'd just departed got captured by militants in beat-up Toyota pickups.

In Kuwait, "there were occasional arguments about the war, about what our role was," Hatfield says. "It was a lot to process . . . . I don't know who's looking for it, but somebody is looking for a sense of closure over this conflict. They're conceptualizing modern warfare in a way that hasn't reflected the reality in a long time."

Elements of the 10th Mountain Division helped secure the Kabul airport during the evacuations—Hatfield's friends and colleagues. If not for the manifest fates, Otis and his men could well have been there, too, through the madness of the visa checkpoints. They could well have been there for the suicide bombing at Abbey Gate. In the wake of this tragedy, Hatfield sends word that he's no longer sure about his participation in this interview. He feels he didn't see enough of the war to say anything worthwhile. He wants the focus to be on the fallen.

I talk him down. His perspective transcends any phase of this war. His confusion is that of an honest young man trying to reason with the impossible, and that's as ubiquitous to armed conflict as any weapon or tactic.

Hatfield's now at Fort Drum, in western New York, adjusting to life as a garrison leader. He's trying to square the messy past with the present and future at once. He's spending his leave days with his parents and his nights with old friends, most of whom work in art or media and have no idea how to even ask about Afghanistan. He's glad they don't. "I don't have the emotional space yet," he says.

And then what? This isn't a question only for Lieutenant Otis Hatfield but for the U. S. military as a whole. "Near-peer" adversaries like Russia and China necessitate a shift back to the sort of large-scale operational training employed during the cold war. What's old is new again.

Still, Hatfield hopes the past two decades maintain some relevance.

When the Taliban toppled Kabul, Farkhonda's neighbors started burning their books. She did not.

HER PARENTS MAY'VE *for Afghanistan,"* NOT ACCEPTABLE *for*

"Being pro-COIN now is kind of inflammatory, but it gets something about today's world," he says. "Nowadays everybody with an Internet connection participates in conflict. Anyone with an Internet connection writes the narrative of war."

THE AFGHAN

KABUL SITS IN A narrow, dusty bowl in eastern Afghanistan, surrounded by the Hindu Kush mountains. Humans began settling the area before the Bronze Age, and more than 4.3 million people now call it home. Kabul has served as an economic center for centuries and a political one at least since the second emir of the Durrani Empire moved his court there in 1776 to better quash revolt.

The British Empire fought three wars in Afghanistan, using Kabul as a base of operations in the first two and as a bombing target in the third. Later, during Soviet occupation, Red Army headquarters perched itself in Kabul. Then, in the new millennium, came a new foreign power, which stayed for twenty years.

The Taliban (re-)claimed Kabul in mid-August, a

PHOTOGRAPH BY ROHULLAH

"SORT OF ACCEPTED THIS DESTINY *Farkhonda says. "I don't know. But it's us. We want* SOMETHING DIFFERENT."

fait accompli even before their vanguard reached the city's outskirts. Momentum is a force no clever government spokesperson has ever been able to stop. In about ten days, from the toppling of Zaranj to the fall of Kabul, the theoretical became the inevitable for soldiers and citizens alike.

Farkhonda, twenty-four, was born southwest of the capital, in Ghazni, and as a toddler in early 2001 moved with her family to Kabul. (She asked that her full name be withheld to protect her identity.) We talk and text over the week following Kabul's seizure.

She says she couldn't sleep the night the Taliban entered her city. It was too eerie, bouts of deep stillness punctured by fits of gunfire and sirens. "The gunshots might not be Taliban," she says. "The gangs are using this as an opportunity." And the helicopters: Americans and well-connected Afghans fleeing the war through the clouds.

Farkhonda is part of a generation of young Afghans raised in a post-Taliban country, believing in the ideas of freedom and democracy they've learned from an early age. The American invasion didn't bring only soldiers to Afghanistan, after all—it brought aid workers and entrepreneurs and teachers, too. While attending university, Farkhonda took advanced English lessons and landed an internship with a consulting firm. After she graduated, the company hired her as a researcher. She met her husband, a programmer, while working with him on a development project.

This is the flip side of the forever war, the one that gives instead of takes, one many Americans—and I count myself among this number—tend not to consider when bandying about that term. For the vast majority of Farkhonda's conscious existence, she's lived in an openish society, where a young woman could study and work and dream. Was all of Afghanistan like this the past twenty years? No. But hers was.

Farkhonda says America's withdrawal began to feel real "in the last three months . . . . The situation got tenser," she says, "and then the war spread everywhere." As militants captured one province, then another, she noticed an influx of displaced people to Kabul. She still describes the Afghan security forces in the present tense. "But after that"—within forty-eight hours, in fact—"was Kandahar and then Mazar-i-Sharif, and I knew everything was going to fall apart." That was just one day before we first speak. "It all happened so rapidly."

Farkhonda is angry, not with the U.S. government—on the record, at least—but with her own. She feels betrayed in particular by Ashraf Ghani, the democratically elected president whose flight from the country with a reported $169 million in cash birthed a denial and countless conspiracy theories, as Ghani is Pashtun, the same ethnic group that fills most of the Taliban ranks.

Fear now reigns in Kabul, she says: "Almost every shop is closed, even the bakeries. You do not see a single woman on the streets." Some of her neighbors started burning their books, but Farkhonda couldn't bring herself to do that—"not yet," she says—so she and her husband spent the better part of that morning hiding theirs. She held on to important work papers, too—a small gesture of hope for normalcy. They scrubbed their phones and removed the art from their walls. Not everyone in the family is taking such precautions. "For my parents and my mother-in-law, it's not very worrying, actually, because it won't change their lives much," Farkhonda says. "My father is a doctor; even with the Taliban in Kabul, he'll still practice as a doctor. My older brothers-in-law are shopkeepers; they have jobs that won't put their lives in danger."

She thinks her parents' tempered attitude might come from having "been through maybe worse"—the Taliban's first reign and the Soviet and U.S. occupations—"or maybe they have sort of accepted this destiny for Afghanistan. I don't know. But it's not acceptable for us. We want something different."

She and her husband are ineligible for SIVs, as they didn't work for a U.S. government entity. So they've applied to as many immigration programs as they can and have packed go bags in case one miraculously comes through. And if the legal routes to leaving don't pan out, that won't stop them from trying. I ask what she thinks will come next. "Honestly, I have no idea," she says. But she knows her objective. "Primarily, we have to get out of Afghanistan."

Despite all the tumult, despite the collapse of most everything she's ever known, she says she's still drawing strength from her favorite literary passage, ascribed to the thirteenth-century poet Rumi:

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
Where the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.

Writer's note: As this story went to print, I received word that both Farkhonda and her husband succeeded in getting out of Afghanistan and to safety.

THE IDRIS ELBA EFFECT

(continued from page 81)

when he walks into a room with which he handles himself. And that's the sort of suave nature that Bond exudes, that confidence in any situation: strength, calm, and awareness. In terms of physicality and being able to move with the punches, you can imagine him handling a situation where things get dire or dangerous, then finishing it off with a smile or some wry, intelligent quip.

"But I don't want that to be misconstrued as if I know who the next Bond is," the director continues, "or if he's even being considered."

Certainly Elba is not waiting around to be anointed by the Broccoli clan, guardians of Bond. "There's definitely a version where I see myself doing a few pictures of *Luther*," he says. "Like I said, if you can make Bonds, and just retell these incredible scenarios he finds himself in, you can do exactly the same with John. I can see him growing older. There's no shortfall of evil people who have got just bad intentions in the world. So I don't see why John should stop doing what he does."

It is hard to resist the notion that Elba's recent brush with mortality might inspire a reframing of his life principles. He's not so sure. "I've lived a proper full life," he says. "That's always been my mantra: 'If I was to go tomorrow, at least I had a full life.' And if I had succumbed to Covid, I could go with hand on heart saying, 'Look, I had a good innings.' But I don't have the time to mess around. My ambition is bigger than my head, but I still think I've got stuff to offer the world. A contribution," he mumbles, almost to himself as much as to me. "Still got a contribution."

That "full life," that "good innings"—a thing we Brits actually say and not a typo, baseball fans—there's some understatement there. Elba has had a handful of full lives: growing up in a racist, hostile London; a few lost years in New York, followed by an iconic breakthrough role, a prolific career, three marriages, two kids, at least one midlife crisis. And, through all these highs and disappointments, a drive that resolutely doesn't wane. "A lot of people who work in Hollywood have been doing it since they were kids, and it's all they were or are," says Fukunaga. "They've experienced more as characters than they have as actual people. And I feel like Idris comes in a complete opposite way. He comes in more as a person, as a fully formed human, than he is the character. Then he brings all that to his characters."

Elba has become one of the modern screen greats because of his facility for projecting strength and vulnerability at the same time. You don't—you *can't*—play those troubled men so deftly without having endured some of life's struggles yourself. Elba's been worn down by the past eighteen months, nearly broken. But the next time he goes down aisle 34, the experiences will be there, ready to pull from the shelf.

HAVE SPERM, WILL TRAVEL

(continued from page 95)

her face softened. She explained that she'd been a co-parent before, but when the relationship ended, so did her connection with the children. It was devastating. She'd considered having a kid herself, but she presented in a masculine way and was self-conscious about how pregnancy would look on her body. And then, at age forty-one, she thought: *That's not a good enough reason*.

Ari presented LaKeisha with the cup, and afterward her wife ushered her outside and back into their SUV. They'd made a cozy nest for her in the back seat with pillows and a sex toy, because they'd heard having an orgasm helps the sperm find their way.

"The fact that you used our bathroom means we have a connection," Devin said as LaKeisha got settled. "Listen, what's meant to happen will happen."

"No!" Ari said, suddenly stern. "I wasn't meant to have ninety kids. You have to *make* it happen."

ELAINE'S C-SECTION WAS scheduled for early August. "You've had such an easy pregnancy," Ari had told her during one of their weekly talks. She wanted to laugh, or cry. She'd been in a car accident and was on bed rest for weeks, but she hadn't bothered to tell Ari. "We're not in a relationship, and it's not as if he cares," she said.

He'd flown to Memphis for Memorial Day, and she'd booked a hotel room for the weekend. At one point she'd taken a call, and Ari said he'd mind Ember and her cousins. He distracted them with water balloons. When they burst against the popcorn ceiling, he laughed as loudly as the kids did. Ember put a balloon under her shirt—"Now *I'm* pregnant," she'd said. Elaine had tried to keep the stress from showing on her face, but it must've been visible anyway. Ari had told her to relax, but of course the room wasn't in his name. "Then he got in the shower and went to bed," Elaine said. "There was pizza and balloons everywhere. That's his life."

Ari kept saying he wanted to attend the birth, but she couldn't tell whether he was serious. She could designate only one person to join her in the room and was afraid that if she picked him, he'd be hampered by Covid restrictions and she'd be giving birth alone.

When I visited her in Memphis, Elaine, who's now forty-one, was eight months pregnant and still as busy as ever. I met her and her daughter at a sandwich shop, where Ember chattered about an upcoming pageant. She'd been working on her talent act, which involved sleight of hand, a cape that lit up, and some flips. Elaine's mother stopped by the restaurant to take Ember to vacation Bible school. As her mother walked in the door, Elaine shot me an uneasy look. "I haven't told her that I'm pregnant yet," she said. Startled, I kept mum. After her mother left, she said she didn't feel up to the drama of explaining the pregnancy. "Maybe she knows and isn't saying anything, either," she mused. "Or she just thinks I gained weight."

Elaine had heard that the fire department might install car seats, so after we picked up diapers at Walmart, we cruised by the local fire station. "Let's go flirt with some firemen," she said. We failed to get her car seat installed—apparently there were liability issues—but Elaine was unbothered. After it got dark, we picked up Ember, and on the car ride home she talked about Ari. "He's my brother's father," she informed me solemnly. Elaine was still deciding what to name her son. She knew that some other moms gave their kids names that nodded at Ari's participation—Ariella, Accari, Arianna—or else they used his middle name, Lee. She was concerned that if he did end up coming for the birth, the hospital would ask him to sign the birth certificate, as he had for a number of his other children. She worried that would pose logistical problems down the line, and plus it felt more intimate than the situation warranted. "I'm definitely not going for that," she said.

A couple weeks later, Ari flew to Memphis. His plane landed at 2:00 A.M. and he didn't want to disturb Elaine, so he parked his rental in front of her house and fell asleep. Half an hour later, he heard her car. She'd gone to pick up Ember's babysitter. At 5:00 A.M., Elaine and Ari went to the hospital.

Once there, things went better than she'd expected. Ari made sure her phone was charged, took note of the medications they gave her, inquired about side effects. He kept checking to see if she was comfortable. It calmed her down, having him there. When the nurse, mistaking them for a couple, asked if they already had any kids, they looked at each other. "I've got ninety," Ari said. The nurse chuckled, like she'd heard that one before.

Ari had been thinking that it might soon be time for him to retire from the sperm gig. He'd just turned forty-six, the age his father stopped having children. Sperm quality declines with age, which meant his children could be at a slightly elevated risk for birth defects. Retiring would mean there wouldn't be that many more births in his future. Instead of frantically generating life, perhaps it was time for him to sit back and take stock of the lives he'd created: a hundred kids charging through toddlerhood, elementary school, puberty, adolescence.

With Ari having so many children, Elaine assumed he would be an old pro in the delivery room. "I thought he would know everything," she told me. "I had no idea he would be so green, so excited." The baby boy was born at 5:17 P.M., weighing a healthy nine pounds. Ari babbled enthusiastically, talking about the baby's little nose, his abundant hair, how he'd grow up to be an athlete. Before Ari left the next day, he told Elaine he wanted to attend more births. "That was an *experience*," he said.

By the time she was discharged, Elaine still hadn't decided what she wanted to call the baby, but a few hours later she texted Ari. She'd settled on a name: Emerson Lee Nagel Byrd.

THE BEAUTY IN LYING TO YOURSELF

(continued from page 56)

facts, his bankruptcies and busted marriages, I were telling the history of the world by looking only at wars and plagues.

And then, as if real life were writ in a grand narrative—a common illusion—plague we got.

NOW I HAVE TO TELL YOU A BIT ABOUT DAN BUDD. Budd co-owns a café in Red Hook, New York, not far from where I live. Taste Budd's Cafe is a hangout with open-mic nights and homemade fudge. Budd, a famed pastry chef, was lying sleepless in bed one night when Covid hit eighteen months ago, just prior to the statewide shutdown, worrying about his family, his neighbors, and his café. In a moment of widespread collective retreat, Budd decided he had to run the other way.

It was just a website at first. A few lawn signs. A helpline. The name: Red Hook Responds. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing, scope unknown. But in a global crisis that would keep people isolated and homebound, Dan Budd could foresee meeting a few immediate needs: reducing the fear, and feeding the hungry.

The helpline served a dual purpose: to sign up volunteers and to field requests. Budd partnered with a local foundation. He was able to fund restaurants suddenly struggling for their lives to make dinner for area residents, which he delivered free of charge. Within six weeks, Budd's organization had more than four hundred volunteers doing grocery and pharmacy runs, chatting over the phone with the lonely and the dazed, and delivering fresh nightly meals. I was one of those volunteers.

For all of Covid's many carnival sideshows, the main stage was always one of sickness and death. I got two goodbyes when my dad died; now you were no longer guaranteed even one. How we part from the dying and how we mourn them proved two more contingencies of an unstable existence. As if that were not disillusionment enough, work ceased. In America, where we take work seriously, a great source of meaning vanished or contracted in a matter of days, leaving behind uncertainty and hardship. I, too, found work impossible. At last, everyone was working as I did: from home, and in search of motivation. It should have been business as usual for the writer. But what was the worth of writing books in a world that had ground to a halt, the last of its illusions stripped away, replaced with social distancing and death?

By then, too, the work itself—the one guarantee in grief—was failing me. Because life has no limit, a book equal to life should have no limit. It was unfinishable. And after five years of prepandemic isolation, of exhuming the past and calculating the failures, the pandemic came along to put a finer point on what the project always intended to teach me: Where illusion is lacking, life is all played out. We need dreams to survive, even the irrational ones. And illusions thrive best in a work of fiction, because fiction is crucial to life. To give an honest account of my dad's life, I couldn't just retell the facts; I would be missing the truth.

THE DECISION TO WRITE A NOVEL ABOUT my father's life was, for me, the end of grief. If I could imagine again, if I could invent, the grip of disillusionment had eased. For many months—years, even—I felt not unlike my stepfather the sadist trying to teach a dog a lesson by holding its neck and forcing it to stare at its foulest fact. No reader needs that.

If the end of my grief came at an ironic time—the mass disillusionment brought on by a pandemic—that time also gave me Dan Budd. Budd was no illusion. Nor was the work he was doing. Conjuring a help network where none existed before and built by volunteers in record time took countless hours. Budd worked tirelessly. And when that work bore fruit, when it fed people, when it comforted the lonely and united a community, it did more than these considerable achievements. It restored the necessary illusion that even in a time of crisis there was reason to cheer, and men to admire, and an America that might be great again because it was competent and kind.

I didn't meet Dan until recently, after the vaccine arrived. By then, his volunteers had served twenty-five thousand meals and answered ten thousand help requests.

I have to admit to being reluctant to meet Dan. I didn't care to bring to an end even one of the illusions I had created about him in eighteen months of collective effort. But that reluctance was unfounded. When we sat down at his café, he was as warm and folksy in person as he was in his emails. He was guileless. He opened his heart. He gave credit to others. He cried. I told him up front that I thought he was a hero. His voice broke when he attributed it to God.

I had put God out of mind on the day my dad died. But for Dan Budd, God got him out of bed on a sleepless night and put him to work. Who was under the greater illusion, me or Budd?

The difference between the man I was the day my dad died and the man I am now is that I'm no longer under the illusion that I'm under no illusions. I just don't know what they might be. I try my best not to weigh in on them. I want them to live, that's all, to cast their spell over me, so that I can move around inside them, blithe and happy, like a dreamer.

Joshua Ferris memorialized his father in A Calling for Charlie Barnes, *out now from Little, Brown.*

CREDITS

STORE INFORMATION

For the items featured in Esquire, please consult the website or call the phone number provided.

Table of Contents, p. 15: Dolce & Gabbana **jacket, sweater,** and **trousers,** dolcegabbana.com. Grenson **boots,** grenson.com.

Blueprint, p. 31: Thom Browne **shirt,** thombrowne.com. **P. 32:** CDLP **robe,** cdlp.com. B|M|C **lounge set,** bmcstudio.com. Loro Piana **slippers,** us.loropiana.com. David Yurman **necklace,** davidyurman.com. **P. 34:** Tekla **shorts,** teklafabrics.com. Loro Piana **robe,** us.loropiana.com. Charvet **pajama shirt** and **pants,** mrporter.com. Artemis Design Co. **slippers,** artemisdesignco.com. **P. 36:** Loro Piana Featuring Hiroshi Fujiwara **hooded sweatshirt, trousers, boots, sweaters, T-shirts, skirt, socks, jacket,** and **hat,** us.loropiana.com. **P. 40:** Loewe **bag,** loewe.com. **P. 42:** Gucci **bag,** gucci.com. Telfar **bag,** shop.telfar.net.

Man of Letters and Warm Coats, p. 96: Louis Vuitton Men's **coat,** louisvuitton.com. **P. 97:** Gucci **coat,** gucci.com. Gap **tank,** gap.com. Levi's **jeans,** levi.com. **P. 98:** Prada **coat** and **sweater,** prada.com. AG **jeans,** agjeans.com. Moral Code **shoes,** moralcode.com. Breitling **watch,** breitling.com. Falke **socks,** falke.com. **P. 100:** Canali X 8on8 **coat,** canali.com. Canali **turtleneck,** canali.com. **P. 101:** Hermès **coat, sweater,** and **track pants,** hermes.com. Moral Code **sneakers,** moralcode.com. **P. 102:** Giorgio Armani **coat, sweater,** and **trousers,** armani.com. Tudor **watch,** tudorwatch.com. **P. 103:** Polo Ralph Lauren **coat** and **jeans,** ralphlauren.com. **P. 104:** Dior Men **coat, jacket,** and **trousers,** dior.com. Christian Louboutin **boots,** christianlouboutin.com. Tudor **watch,** tudorwatch.com. **P. 105:** Fendi Men's **coat** and **sweater,** fendi.com. The Row **trousers,** therow.com. Zenith **watch,** zenith-watches.com.

Esquire (ISSN 0194-9535) is published monthly in March and September, bimonthly in April/May and October/November, and trimonthly in December/January/February and June/July/August by Hearst, 300 West 57th St., NY, NY 10019 USA. Steven R. Swartz, President and Chief Executive Officer; William R. Hearst III, Chairman; Frank A. Bennack, Jr., Executive Vice-Chairman. Hearst Magazine Media, Inc.: Debi Chirichella, President, Hearst Magazines Group, and Treasurer; John A. Rohan, Jr., Senior Vice President, Finance; Catherine A. Bostron, Secretary. © 2021 by Hearst Magazine Media, Inc. All rights reserved. Esquire, Man at His Best, Dubious Achievement Awards, The Sound and the Fury, and ♡ are registered trademarks of Hearst Communications, Inc. Periodicals postage paid at N. Y., N. Y., and additional entry post offices. Canada Post International Publications mail product (Canadian distribution) sales agreement no. 40012499. Editorial and Advertising Offices: 300 West 57th St., NY, NY 10019-3797. Send returns (Canada) to Bleuchip International, P. O. Box 25542, London, Ontario N6C 6B2. Subscription prices: United States and possessions, $7.97 a year; Canada and all other countries, $19.97 a year. Subscription services: Esquire will, upon receipt of a complete subscription order, undertake fulfillment of that order so as to provide the first copy for delivery by the Postal Service or alternate carrier within four to six weeks. From time to time, we make our subscriber list available to companies that sell goods and services by mail that we believe would interest our readers. If you would rather not receive such mailings via postal mail, please send your current mailing label or an exact copy to Mail Preference Service, P. O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. You can also visit preferences.hearstmags.com to manage your preferences and opt out of receiving marketing offers by e-mail. For customer service, changes of address, and subscription orders, log on to service.mag.com or write to Customer Service Department, Esquire, P. O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. Esquire is not responsible for unsolicited manuscripts or art. None will be returned unless accompanied by return postage and envelope. Canada BN NBR 10231 0943 RT. Postmaster: Please send address changes to Esquire, P. O. Box 6000, Harlan, IA 51593. Printed in the USA.

THE ESQUIRE EDITORIAL BOARD ENDORSES

The Wearing of Other People's Clothes

PICTURE IT: You're in a friend's backyard on an autumn evening as the sun drops from the sky and the firepit warms up. It's a little crisp, and you didn't bring an extra layer, October catching you by surprise yet again. "Here," says the friend, your host, lobbing something at you. A sweater, a pullover, a light jacket. Not your style, not exactly, but you're cold, so on it goes.

And will you look at that: It's great on you. It fits perfectly. The colors you think you don't wear? They suit your skin tone flawlessly. It feels like it was made exclusively for you. Which it was; it just had to go through your friend first. The only thing better is when he says, "I never wear that one anymore—you keep it."

There is magic in this world, and it's in your friend's hoodie.

Other people's clothes are simply better. We don't know how it works, only that it's true. These articles of clothing have had time to stretch out in the shoulder, shrink at the sleeve from the dryer, get a little worn and weathered. We are most enthusiastic about our own clothes when they are brand-new, but we love them the most when they are broken in. If someone else, someone you know and like, has already gone to the trouble, these clothes arrive on your body just right.

Is there a feeling closer to universe-wide peace than that of wearing a sweatshirt with another person's high school mascot on it? Is there a better secret than moving through the world in a T-shirt from a concert your friend went to and you did not? Does anything put a spring in your step like a button-down with someone else's monogram? We think not. Each one of these comes preloaded with a story. You can't buy that in a store.

Besides, the *buying of the thing* is not the point; we didn't spend our own money on it. We never think about the price tag, because we never saw it. It's a gift, always. If we had actually bought this, it would neither look nor feel as good. The same hoodie, in the same colors, would look and feel different if it were yours.

At a late-summer pool party, we put this principle to the test with a rule: Bring one to three items you were going to donate, put them on the bar in the cabana, and grab something for yourself. Bring an item, take an item.

The result was like one of Jesus' lesser-known, more niche miracles. Everybody came away with something new and perfect. The Henley our friend couldn't pull off looks outstanding on a different person. The *Baywatch* tank top we bought as a lark: ideal for a buddy in better shape. A ten-year-old snatched Irene's old top, tied it off at the waist, and now has an item to reimagine, build outfits around, and grow into.

And it's time. We've spent more hours in our own spaces, among our own shit, than ever before. We're tired of our stuff. We want it to have a good and happy life somewhere else. We'll keep donating as the need inevitably arises, but we'll hold a couple things back, toss one to a chilly friend, and marvel once again as a hoodie finds its forever home.

We love these T-shirts and pullovers and button-downs because they are not our style. (*Do we even know our style?* we think to ourselves as we pull them on.) They are often items we would not have chosen for ourselves, so when they look good, which is always, they broaden our self-understanding. We think: *If I can wear this sweater, what else is true about me that I have never considered?* It's therapy, it's bonding, and it's environmentally sound.

That is why, always and forever, we're down with OPC.

COVETEUR/TRUNK ARCHIVE

Don't stop now—it keeps going on esquire.com.

When you choose paper products, you're playing a part in a circle of caring that shows nature some heart.

When you choose paper products, you create a healthy market for forest products, which in turn encourages forest owners to plant more trees. We grow twice as much timber as we use. Today, U.S. forestlands are strong. In the past 30 years, forest area has increased by nearly 33 million acres.

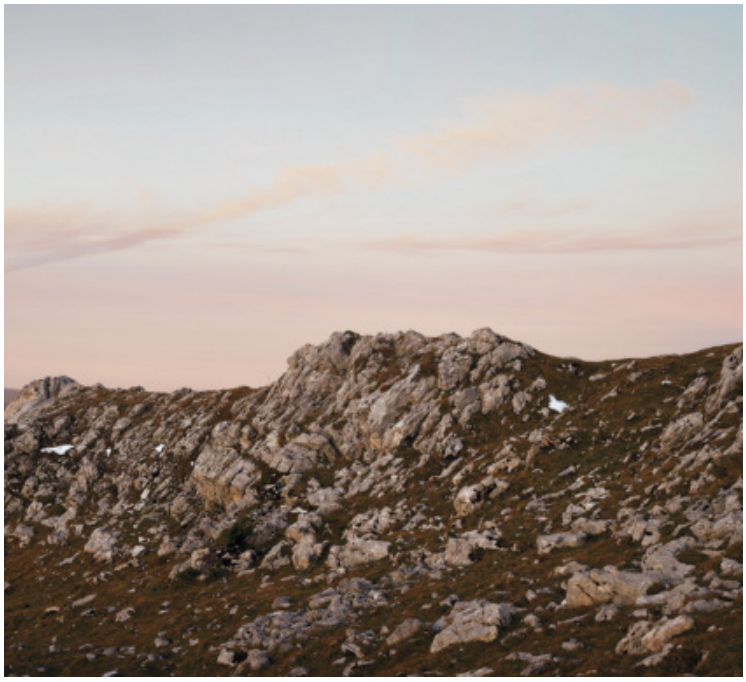
CHOOSE PAPER & PAPER PACKAGING AND BE A FORCE FOR NATURE
Learn more @ paperfornature.com

Paper & Packaging
How life unfolds.®

From the Makers of Paper and Packaging

© 2021 and ® Paper and Packaging Board. Please recycle your paper and boxes.

BORN IN LE BRASSUS



AUDEMARS PIGUET
Le Brassus

RAISED AROUND THE WORLD

SÉBASTIEN FOUCAN

AUDEMARS PIGUET BOUTIQUES : NEW YORK | ATLANTA | BAL HARBOUR | BEVERLY HILLS | BOSTON
BRICKELL | CHICAGO | COSTA MESA | DALLAS | EAST HAMPTON | LAS VEGAS | MANHASSET